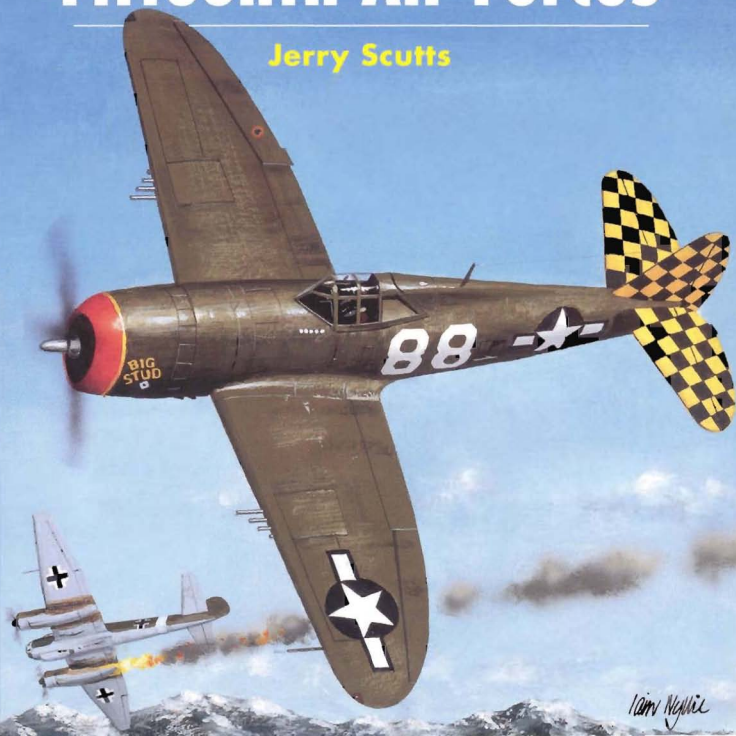


P-47 Thunderbolt Aces of the Ninth and Fifteenth Air Forces

Jerry Scutts



JERRY SCUTTS has worked in the field of aviation publishing since the late 1960s, writing over 40 books that have covered a broad spectrum of subject matter ranging from US Navy floatplane fighters in World War 2 to the exploits of the USAF's Phantom IIs over Vietnam.

His specialist areas are the Luftwaffe and the US Army Air Forces in World War 2, and he originally appeared on the Osprey list as an author as long ago as 1977, when he wrote the second volume in the now much sought after *Air Cam Air War* series – many of the jacket illustrations in this series were also painted by Jerry Scutts.

Based in leafy Blackheath, in South-east London, he has been a regular contributor to the *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces* series since its inception in 1994. Indeed, the first two volumes in this best-selling series bear his name. Since then, Jerry Scutts has written a further three aces books, all of which have reprinted at least twice, and also produced a single volume in the companion *Osprey Combat Aircraft* series.

P-47 Thunderbolt Aces of the Ninth and Fifteenth Air Forces

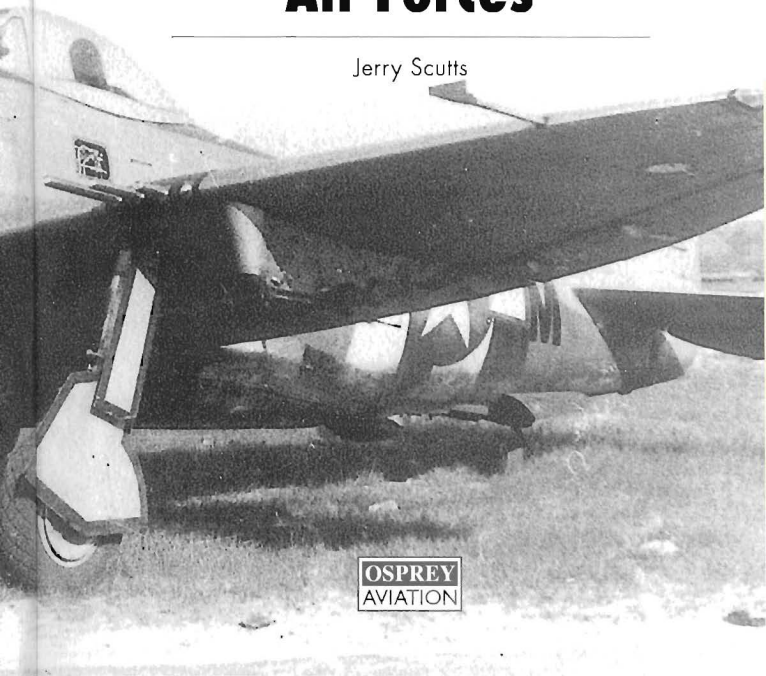


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OSPREY AIRCRAFT OF THE ACES • 30

P-47 Thunderbolt Aces of the Ninth and Fifteenth Air Forces

Jerry Scutts



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AVIATION

Front cover

On 30 January 1944, a Ju 88 flying east of Palmanova, in north-eastern Italy, had the unfortunate distinction of becoming the sixth, and final, victim of Lt Col Robert Lee 'Bob' Baseler. As Group Executive and Operations Officer of the 325th FG 'Checkertails' (then based at Foggia, in southern Italy), P-40F Warhawk ace Baseler was leading 60 Thunderbolts that had been sent to sweep airfields in the Villaorba and Udine areas of northern Italy, prior to the arrival of Fifteenth Air Force heavy bombers. He was flying his famous P-47D-10 42-75008 *BIG STUD* on this occasion, the aircraft being part of the group's high numbered 319th FS – hence the yellow trim to the red theatre nose band. Baseler was particularly pleased to spot 'his' Junkers bomber, for it was the only time he ever encountered a multi-engined enemy aircraft in flight. 'I saw the Ju 88 and gave him a damned good chase. I finally caught up with him, gave him a burst and saw him crash and burn', Baseler later recounted. This mission proved such a success that the 325th FG was later awarded its second Distinguished Unit Citation (DUC), and Baseler the Silver Star – the latter was pinned to his chest by Gen Nathan F Twining, (Commander of the Fifteenth Air Force) just minutes after he had vacated *BIG STUD* upon recovering at Foggia! (cover artwork by Iain Wyllie)

Back cover

Lt George Novotny poses alongside his P-47D-16 (42-75971) of the 'low numbered', but top-scoring, 317th FS/325th FG. Photographed in April 1944 at the group's Lesina base, on the Italian east coast north of Foggia, Novotny's Thunderbolt wore the name *Lady Janie VI* on the starboard side of its cowl. As was sometimes the case, these personalised markings remained on this aircraft long after the originating pilot, or crew chief, had rotated home – Novotny returned to the USA in June 1944 (*Novotny*)

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EDITOR'S NOTE

To make this best-selling series as authoritative as possible, the editor would be extremely interested in hearing from any individual who may have relevant photographs, documentation or first-hand experiences relating to the elite pilots, and their aircraft, of the various theatres of war. Any material used will be fully credited to its original source. Please write to Tony Holmes at 10 Prospect Road, Sevenoaks, Kent, TN13 3UA, Great Britain, or by e-mail at: tony.holmes@osprey-jets.freeserve.co.uk

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INTRODUCTION

This record of the tactical fighter groups equipped with the P-47 primarily covers the most successful pilots of the Ninth Air Force who encountered the Luftwaffe and achieved a personal tally of five or more aerial kills. In addition, it details the air combat successes of the 325th FG, which was unique in being the only Thunderbolt unit assigned to the strategic Fifteenth Air Force. Aces were rare in the Ninth, for dogfighting was not its pilots' primary mission, so it is therefore pleasing to focus on some of the lesser-known aviators of World War 2.

A fitting summary of this coverage of the tactical aces might well be 'every little helps', for small numbers of enemy aircraft destroyed by whatever means, and whatever unit, contributed to the ultimate defeat of the Luftwaffe. Also, it was undoubtedly true that considerable pride was felt by those ground attack pilots who had beaten the enemy in the air. Such men (many of whom kept a meticulous record of their sorties in tiny stencilled bombs, tanks, trucks, trains, bridges and ships painted on their aircraft) placed great – even greater – personal value on a single small swastika or iron cross worn beneath their cockpit. This symbol marked a man out as having all-round ability as a fighter pilot.

Egos might have been dented, however, when close scrutiny of air combat claims transformed a line of swastikas to a mere one, or a percentage of one, confirmed victory. To be fair, many pilots were recording their ground kills, not aerial claims, and although this practice was not officially condoned by higher authority, the latter did not mind this little boost to *esprit de corps*.

Research is still needed to discover the basic details of another dozen, or so, P-47s (over and above those illustrated here) flown by notable pilots in the Ninth, and in time this will hopefully be done. Data for the illustrations in this book came, as is often the case, from fragmentary written notes, xeroxes, internet images, decal sheets and video footage, all of which do not reproduce too well. We hope, therefore, that you will trust us to have done the best we can with the references available. Any doubts we still have as to the accuracy of the material presented is mentioned in the text, so please let us know if you can fill any of the remaining gaps on the subject of Ninth Air Force aces.

Among the writers and researchers who helped with this project, I would like to thank Steve Blake, John Campbell, Jim Crow, Roger Freeman, IPMS-USA, Ernie McDowell, George Novotny, 'Mort' Magoffin, Mel Paisley and the archives of the Imperial War Museum and the USAF.

The reference material on this aspect of the air war is mountainous, but titles such as *To Win the Winter Sky*, the *Mighty Eighth War Diary*, Frank Olynk's listings of AAF combat kills and Kenn Rust's monographs on the missions and markings of US air forces of World War 2 are all invaluable, as are the published histories of the fighter groups involved.

ESCORTS AND DIVE-BOMBING

When the Ninth Air Force was reorganised in England on 16 October 1943, plans were well advanced for an invasion of Europe. The force, which would conduct tactical operations in support of one of the greatest military operations in history, had had an antecedent in North Africa, but the 'new' Ninth was built almost entirely from scratch. It would be composed to a large extent of new combat fighter groups which would arrive in England, pending deployment in an undertaking that still lay months ahead.

As new groups began flying in from America during the autumn of 1943, plans to base them on what was fast becoming a very crowded island were changed, modified and changed again, as the composition of the Ninth fluctuated. Allied planners charged with the task of balancing the requirements of the RAF's tactical squadrons with those of the AAF faced a considerable challenge. Fortunately, this influx had been anticipated, and a programme to prepare a series of Advanced Landing Grounds (ALGs) along the south coast from Kent to Hampshire undertaken. It was on these airfields that the majority of the groups equipped with P-47s were to be based until such time as they would be able to move to the continent. It was therefore vital that these temporary '90-day' airfields be as close as possible to their intended targets so as to enable the anticipated high frequency of cross-Channel sorties to be maintained.

While it was planned that the Ninth Air Force would have a substantial force of fighter-bomber groups flying the P-38, P-47 and P-51, the exact number of units (and their aircraft type) was revised, as was the number of required airfields, and their location.

A perfect example of this change centred on the Ninth's experience with the re-engined, Merlin-powered, P-51B Mustang, which it was originally scheduled to receive in great numbers. However, once AAF chiefs

'Flag 'em away!' P-47Ds of the 366th FG are seen being waved off from Membury (Station 466), in Wiltshire, on a training mission – note the lack of underwing ordnance. Membury had originally belonged to the Eighth Air Force, and was only used by the group whilst working up to operational status. The 366th FG moved to Thruxton on 1 March 1944, and flew its first combat mission from the base exactly a fortnight later. It was during this pre-D-Day period that the pilots of the tactical fighter groups 'cut their teeth' and scored their first aerial victories (IWM)



pilots learned was that if they were attacked by enemy fighters while carrying ordnance, the load had to go. Experience showed, however, that this edict should be interpreted depending on the prevailing situation, as the Germans soon became adept at feint attacks to persuade the American 'Jabos' to get rid of their bombs, before speedily departing.

Fighter-bomber pilots were told, therefore, to concentrate utterly on their briefed ground targets, and to dogfight enemy aircraft only under extreme provocation. This meant, in effect, that they should wait to be attacked. On pain even of court martial in some groups, the rule was enforced, with the recommendation that a man should pick up some holes in his aircraft to prove that he had been attacked first!

As the Ninth Air Force grew in strength, interpretation of the rules had to become more flexible within rapidly changing tactical situations. Unit commanders had, on numerous occasions, to 'call it as they saw it'.

But once the fighter-bomber ethos had taken shape, most pilots wanted to be the best in the squadron at destroying ground targets, in the best squadron in the group, and the best group in the command – a self-generating competitive spirit that fostered excellent *esprit de corps*, not to mention a remarkable degree of individual prowess during one of the most dangerous assignments in the AAF. Pilots came to appreciate just how much GIs, or 'doughboys' (colourful journalese often prevailed in the reports from the front), relied on them to create conditions for an advance without excessive casualties. Nobody wanted to let them down.

— JANUARY 1944 —

As 1944 began, IX FC continued to loan its P-47s to its 'big brother', VIII FC. Groups new to the European theatre undertook escort work with some enthusiasm, for the chance to meet the Luftwaffe in combat had not really been anticipated. These pioneer tactical units also had the relative luxury of operating from established airfields, rather than ALGs – airfields that had been built for medium bombers, which had yet to arrive in England. The outline plan was that these fighter groups would move further south as, and when, the worst of the winter conditions had passed, for the ALGs had not been intended for use as 'bad weather' airfields.

Joining the 358th FG on the last day of November 1943 was the 362nd FG, its component 377th, 378th and 379th FSs occupying the airfield at Wormingford (Station 159), in Essex. Next to arrive, on 23 December, was the 365th FG (386th, 387th and 388th FSs), which operated temporarily from one of the new bomber airfields at Gosfield (Station 154), in Essex. The groups took full advantage of the facilities, which included paved runways, ample servicing areas and brick-built living quarters.

The strength of three Ninth Air Force P-47 groups, plus the Mustang-equipped 354th FG, represented a substantial boost to the number of



This photograph was also taken during May 1944, when VIPs and the press were given the chance to meet American pilots of the tactical air forces on the eve of the invasion of Europe. Here, pilots of the 358th FG's 365th and 367th FSs watch a flyby performed by their colleagues for the attendant visitors. These men are, from left to right, Capt Edward H Sprietsma (killed in action on 21 June 1944), Lt Paul D Floyd (missing in action/evaded 28 July 1944), Lt Earl A Cabe, Lt J B Westwood and Lt Milford C Peterson (IWM)

Taken at the same 'open house' event as the previous photo, this aircraft was one of at least three P-47s lined up for inspection – each Thunderbolt boasted suitable identification labels on their cowlings, and were carrying typical war loads. This particular aircraft, flown by a Capt Motzenbecker (whose exact unit remains unknown) had a 500-lb bomb affixed to both underwing racks. Such a configuration ably demonstrated to visitors the typical war-winning load of the hundreds of Ninth Air Force P-47Ds then flying from southern England. Thousands of sorties proved this particular combination to be all but unbeatable

fighters available to the Eighth Air Force, who made full use of their services escorting heavy bombers well into the new year.

For groups to regularly send most of their aircraft as far into Occupied Europe (typically Germany) as their fuel would allow was a hazardous duty that could hardly be expected to continue without loss, and on 7 January four 358th FG P-47Ds failed to return from an escort to Ludwigshafen. Returning over France, pilots from the 'freshman' Thunderbolt group mistook the *Jagdwaaffe* base at Florennes for an RAF airfield after they had become disorientated in heavy overcast. Maj Donald Younglas, CO of the 367th FS, along with Lts Lance Pusette and Corlys Bedford, were shot down by Fw 190A-6s from I./JG 26 that had been ordered aloft sometime prior to the lost P-47s appearing overhead their base. It was perhaps doubly unfortunate for the Americans that the intercept was led by 30-kill *Experte*, Hauptmann Karl Borris, who downed one of the Thunderbolts near Cousoire. All three 358th FG aircraft were subsequently confirmed as having been destroyed by I./JG 26.

Two other P-47s were claimed by JG 26 that day, one of them almost certainly being the aircraft flown by Lt Mark Osborne of the 365th FS, who was last heard calling out a 'Mayday' over the Channel. Despite an air and sea search, he was never found. Such a blow was a bitter pill to swallow, but on the 29th the group partially redressed the balance with two confirmed victories by its pilots during an escort mission to Frankfurt. On this occasion the 358th FG was part of a 503-strong(!) Thunderbolt force put up by the Eighth and Ninth Air Forces.

FEBRUARY 1944

The 362nd and 365th FGs went operational with shallow-range 'shake-down' missions on 8 and 22 February respectively – by which time the 368th had officially been transferred to the Ninth Air Force, effective 1 February. Little change was otherwise in evidence, with bomber escort still taking priority for IX FC's P-47 groups. Pilots were, however, occa-



sionally able to take a fleeting look at targets on the ground in Occupied Europe, for it was important for them to remain familiar with the types of sorties that they would eventually be fully occupied flying. Therefore, a modicum of strafing and bombing was carried out against German ground targets located within the Thunderbolt's combat range.

Equipped entirely with 'razorback' P-47Ds, IX FC's groups generally gave shorter range penetration and withdrawal support to the bombers – two daily missions to cover the 'heavies' on their outward and return flights were not uncommon during the period leading up to the invasion.

Bomber support would occupy most, if not all, the Ninth's P-47 groups right through to the launch of Operation *Overlord*, during which time pilots were not only offered the chance to 'cut their combat teeth' in clashes with the *Jagdwaaffe*, but to gain useful theatre experience as well.

These early tactical sorties gave further proof of the P-47D's ruggedness and all round ability to destroy all types of target. Expanding the role of the principal US escort fighter to take in the ground attack mission had been initiated by VIII FC's groups in November 1943, and the Ninth's pilots (who enjoyed the not insignificant advantage of flying the same aircraft) could study the results of these sorties and 'short cut' the tactics they would use. The P-47 had no special equipment or sights to deliver bombs accurately, but by perfecting steep and shallow dive attacks, pilots found that they could destroy, or cripple, targets with great precision.

One of the primary assets of the P-47 was that it boasted a heavier armament than most comparable aircraft in the Allied inventory. Eight 0.50-in Colt Browning machine guns, with up to 425 rounds per gun, had the reliability and rate of fire to devastate everything from locomotives to flak emplacements, and soft-skinned vehicles to lightly armoured tanks. And of course eight 'fifties' were more than adequate for destroying enemy aircraft of all types – as had already been amply demonstrated by VIII FC. All these targets, and a good few more, would fail to withstand a determined assault by Thunderbolts in the coming months. Even small warships were to occasionally succumb to a P-47's 'broadside'!

As one unit commander later noted, 'there were few targets, much less personnel, able to function very well after being strafed by four P-47s attacking at 'zero feet in line abreast'. In such an instance, streams of 0.50-cal bullets from 32 barrels took some resisting – and very little could.

This was yet another demonstration of the soundness of the basic fourship flight, or 'finger four', discovered by the Germans before the war and copied by the AAF, and most other air forces, ever since. This formation has rarely been bettered, for the high degree of flexibility it offers to pilots allows them to provide maximum mutual cover in both the air-to-air and air-to-ground environments. Building on sound tactics, the Ninth Air Force introduced a few variations of its own, tailored to tactical situations.

MARCH 1944

Having joined the 365th FG's HQ flight in late January 1944, following a six-month spell as CO of the 388th FS, future ranking group ace Maj Robert Coffey claimed his first kill – an Fw 190, west of Luxembourg – on 2 March. Flying a 'razorback' P-47D-16, Coffey (who had made lieutenant-colonel ten days after scoring his premier victory) added what he thought was a second victory on the 24th of that same month, although

there was some confusion in his mind as to exactly which type of aircraft had fallen to his guns near Bernay St Martin, east of Caen. It went down in the records as a 'stripped' Fw 190 or a 'Fw 290', the latter being a non-existent type probably 'created' as a result of sketchy intelligence data on the new 'long-nose' Fw 190D. Coffey was awarded only a 'damaged'.

As the build-up of P-47 groups in the UK continued, the first foray into enemy territory for newcomer units usually comprised a sweep along the French coast. This was the briefed mission of the 366th FG on its first combat sorties on 14 March. Based at Thruxton (Station 407), in Hampshire, the group went rapidly over to the offensive with a dive-bombing attack on the French coastal airfield at St Valéry-sur-Somme on the 15th.

Newly arrived IX FC groups also benefited from the experience of VIII FC, which supplied pilots (usually of squadron and group commander status) on temporary transfer. These men would lead several missions and answer the newcomers' numerous questions on the nature of the enemy, and the curiosities of the ETO in general, and England in particular.

At the ALGs, pilots usually found their accommodation comprised 'pup tents' rather than barracks, although a few secured refuge in permanent buildings requisitioned for the purpose by the Army. When the ground became wet, American ingenuity was stretched to the limit to enable the men to remain dry – both in and out of the tents. There were the usual gripes, but in general the situation was accepted with alacrity.

On the same day that the 366th flew its first mission (14 March), the 368th FG (395th, 396th and 397th FSs) at Greenham Common (Station 486) in Berkshire, also sent its initial sorties off to 'take a look' at Europe. It would not be long before the group's pilots would find some action.

On 25 March, the 24-year-old CO of the 396th FS, Maj Paul P Douglas, encountered Fw 190s while flying a P-47D-16 south east of Amiens. Although shots were exchanged, and Douglas felt he had scored telling

Aircraft and pilots of the 358th FG attended this same publicity function in May, and if any of the visiting dignitaries had questions on the function of the triple 'stove pipe' M-10 rocket tubes slung under the wings of this P-47D, Lt Milford C Peterson of the 367th FS was on hand to answer them. The aircraft, coded IA-V and named *Lady Luck*, was actually the personal mount of Capt Robert Schuster of the 366th FS. Partially visible on the aircraft's cowl is an early version of the squadron badge, with a female figure in place of the later, officially adopted, eagle and lightning flash on a circular field of stars (IWM HU 76214)





When camouflage was officially dropped from US military aircraft in October 1943, a number of early P-47D production blocks were affected. Among the Ninth Air Force tactical fighter groups that took delivery of natural metal finish aircraft before the invasion was the 36th FG at Kingsnorth, in Kent, represented here by a P-47D-21 from the 23rd FS

strikes against the enemy, the action led to an inconclusive credit. His combat report read 'one probable and one damaged'. Undeterred, Douglas would go on to greater things, although in common with several other Ninth Air Force aces, it would take him some time.

APRIL 1944

On 11 and 12 April the 405th FG (509th, 510th and 511th FSs) and 371st FG (404th, 405th and 406th FSs) flew their first missions from, respectively, Christchurch (Station 416) and Bisterne (Station 417), in Hampshire – the latter site was classified an ALG.

On the 13th, the now combat-seasoned Lt Col Coffey scored his second confirmed kill with the 365th FG in a P-47D-20 when he downed a Bf 109 25 miles south-east of the Belgian city of Charleroi.

Exactly a week later the recently-arrived 48th FG (492nd, 493rd and 494th FSs) undertook its first combat mission from the ex-RAF and Eighth Air Force airfield at Ibsley (Station 347), in Hampshire. On the 24th, 362nd FG boss, Col Morton 'Mac' Magoffin, opened his score with a Bf 109 downed near Kaiserslautern, this combat occurring during a withdrawal support mission flown for Eighth Air Force 'heavies' returning from targets in southern Germany. Magoffin, flying as part of the 377th FS's Red Flight, claimed his Bf 109 as it was chased away from the bombers. Lt MacLean also scored one kill, although two P-47s were lost.

This was a busy period for IX FC units, for as well as flying cross-Channel ground attack missions, regular bomber escort or support sorties were also being undertaken at short notice. And although the 362nd FG was relatively new to the ETO, this did not stop 'higher echelons' from putting the unit 'on the board', and entrusting its pilots with escorting bombers and delivering 1000-lb bombs – indeed, the group took great pride in being the first IX FC unit cleared to use 'thousand pounders'.

But not everything was satisfactory, and among the gripes was the fact that mission take-off times always seemed to coincide with meal times. Trivial though this may seem, pilots had to eat, and there was considerable discussion as to how to integrate 'chow' time with flight time.

Groundcrews, each member of which had specialised duties concerned with maintaining the aircraft, learned to bomb up the P-47s very quickly. And in time, annoyances such as bomb 'hang-ups' over the target were reduced when electric release gear was supplied for the later production batches of P-47Ds that were now in general use. It all took time, but there seemed to be precious little of that as the pre-invasion weeks ticked away.

There was also a feeling that the Ninth's fighter groups were being 'saddled' with the rougher ETO sorties, as 'Mort' Magoffin commented in his recollection of the events surrounding his first kill on 24 April:

'For the morning, we received a good mission – a deep escort for heavy bombers on a full-scale strategic mission to the Kaiserlautern area. Of course, I felt I had to go. Normally the VIII FC took the most lucrative missions, and left the "dregs", or "milk runs", to us in the Ninth, while we waited for the invasion as our principal reason for being in England.

'Arriving just in time for "start engines", I had to finish my pre-flight as we taxied out. To my dismay, I found that my electric gunsight did not work, but as I planned to change the bulb en route, I let the matter ride. Nine times out of ten that would solve the problem, just as it does with your desk lamp. When it didn't, I shrugged my shoulders and said to myself, "Well I probably won't need it anyhow. I've never aborted the leadership and can't now for that piddling matter". So I forgot about it.

'Nothing eventful happened during our period of escorting a segment of the string of B-17s, so after remaining about five minutes' over time, I called for the group to head home. Within a few minutes, we got word that some of the B-24s were under attack by Me 109s, and would appreciate help from any "little friends" available. After a quick calculation, and more out of a desire to see action than prudence, I called out, "Everyone with 185 gallons or more who wants to, do a 180 and come with me. Turk (Maj Charles Teschner, 378th FS CO), take the rest of the group home".

'I figured that we could hurry back east for about 50 miles, get involved for a few minutes, and still have about two hours' gas to get home. In retrospect, I was a bit foolhardy in not showing appropriate concern for the usual headwinds all the way back to England. Upon looking around I found that my flight of four was still intact, and four volunteers followed us as in an additional flight. Anyhow, after about ten minutes' of increased speed heading east, we could see the B-24s in the distance. Suddenly, several Me 109s dived right through us and I called out, "Drop extra tanks, Red Flight will attack. Yellow Flight stay up for high cover". Down we went, rapidly closing on the 109s.

'When I pushed my guns and camera toggle switch, to my horror no sight came on and a funny, fortunate, thing happened. As I skidded about 30 yards off to the rear "Jerry's" right, I smiled and waved, then he waved back and steepened his dive away from me to the left – what a break! The P-47 would out-dive anything, so it was a cinch to overhaul him again. On the other hand, had he hit his right rudder to skid over behind me, I might not be writing this account. Certainly, I'd have had to kick hard left rudder to dive under and behind him to avoid being an easy target.

'In no time at all I found myself relentlessly pursuing a dodging target just above the trees. I hoped my wingman was protecting my tail as I fired two poorly-aimed short bursts at less than 100 yards. I was quite sure I didn't hit him, but my shooting caused him to look back so often that he soon ran into a hill. Later on, I learned that in the skirmishing behind me, my No 4 man (2Lt George W Kelly) had been hit and bailed out early, my wingman had shot a 109 off my tail, and my No 3 man had gone past me in pursuit of a "Jerry".

'Reflecting that we'd done what we could, and perhaps shouldn't even have gone back to help the bombers, I called out, "Well, we're a long way

into Germany – let's go home". A quick retort from my element leader (2Lt John E Hayden) changed things: he said, "Piss on you, colonel – you beat me to that last guy and I'm going to get this one if I have to chase him to Berlin!" I replied, "OK, Hayden, we're coming after you".

Although I chuckled at his aggressive determination, I was concerned about the need to disengage him as soon as possible. For one thing, our gas supply was being exhausted rapidly in a high-speed chase, and for another, the P-47D (without a paddle prop and water injection) was no match for an Me 109 at low-level. We were too late!

As I closed to about a quarter of a mile, my No 3 man and the German went into a Lufberry circle dogfight, and before I could fire, Hayden pulled too tightly and crashed in flames. The "Jerry" turned into me, so I called, "Red Two, turn left and I'll turn right – he'll have to choose, then the other can go after him". The fighter, which had special markings on its side, went after my wingman, and I turned back to get a shot at it. Evidently, I was not in time to prevent its pilot from hitting one wingtip of my wingman's P-47. He saw me coming, broke off and headed east.

My handicap of not having an operable gunsight kept me from firing a parting shot. The dreaded gas shortage caused me to cut the throttle and start a slow climb into the clouds as I headed west, and I called for Red Two to tuck in and save all the gas he could.

I figured that we could surely get beyond the Belgian coast in two hours, but it would be "nip and tuck" to get home if the headwinds were strong. Whereas a high altitude was desirable for low gas consumption, it took more gas to climb up there – and then the headwinds would very likely increase proportionately. As I recall, I went to about 22,000 ft as a compromise, and started a long let down as we crossed over Belgium. We "lucked out" and made it safely into our base at Headcorn, near Maidstone in Kent, in about two hours and ten minutes.

As an aftermath, I fretted a lot about this mission – should I have gone or aborted? We lost two good men (ultimately, I felt better when we learned that Kelly was a prisoner), but surely we helped some B-24s versus the attacking Me 109s by pulling some away on a diversion, and that was the main mission of escorting fighters. Hayden's tragic loss was largely his own fault, its true – but I had caused it to some degree. It cemented our thinking on tactics, which were to dive and hit and run against more manoeuvrable enemy aircraft at low altitude.'

MAY 1944

Two new P-47 groups – namely the 404th FG (506th, 507th and 508th FSs) at Winkton ALG (Station 414), in Hampshire, and the 50th FG (10th, 81st and 313th FSs) at Lymington ALG (Station 551), also in Hampshire – flew their first missions on 1 May. One week and one day later, the Ninth Air Force at last attained full operational strength when, on the 8th, the 373rd FG (410th, 411th and 412th FSs), operating from the ALG at Bisterne (Station 415), again in Hampshire, and the 36th FG (22nd, 23rd and 53rd FSs) at Kingsnorth ALG (Station 418), in Kent, declared themselves operational. The following day the final Thunderbolt group assigned to the Ninth undertook its first mission, the 406th FG (512th, 513th and 514th FSs) flying from Ashford ALG (Station 417), in Kent.



The 405th FG, based at nearby Christchurch, in Hampshire, 'loaned' one of its Thunderbolts to the Aircraft & Armaments Experimental Establishment (A&AEE) at Boscombe Down during the spring of 1944 to allow the P-47 to trial British, rather than American, ordnance. Here, the aircraft in question (P-47D-6 42-74599 from the 509th FS) is seen carrying the short, round-finned British bombs on its wing and belly racks. There were several Thunderbolts at the A&AEE at that time, and it is believed that these tests were part of a programme anticipating RAF use of the P-47 in the Far East later in the war. Note the fairly common application of the flight letter to the trim tab of this aircraft (via Tim Mason)

With their introduction to the frontline, the Ninth now boasted no fewer than 18 fighter-bomber groups – 13 with P-47s, three with P-38s and two with P-51s. Some 42 squadrons were flying Thunderbolts predominantly from ALGs in Hampshire and Kent, and roughly estimating that 15 serviceable aircraft were available from each of the total 54 units at any one time, the Ninth had about 810 tactical fighters, 585 of which were P-47s.

BRIDGE BUSTING

Ninth Air Force fighter groups developed techniques for destroying various types of ground target more or less through practical experience and experimentation. An ordinary fighter like the P-47, with a standard gun-sight, had to be flown with due regard to the strength and nature of the ordnance it could carry, and the target it was trying to destroy. It was soon realised, for example, that dive-bombing a structure like a bridge with 1000-lb HE bombs would not necessarily weaken it enough to collapse the spans. Steep-angle dive-bombing was good for many targets, but it did not work well on bridges.

One pilot who made it his business to find out what did work was Lt Col Donald K Bennett of the 366th FG. Hearing that P-47 pilots were obtaining good bombing results in Italy, he flew out to the MTO in early March 1944 to have a look for himself at the way things were done in-theatre. Having taken it all in, Bennett returned to Thruxton to take command of the 366th FG on 30 April.

What Lt Col Bennett passed on to his pilots was the proven fact of the increased accuracy inherent in skip and glide-bombing – a reduced angle dive with strafe-bombing was an alternative. In the latter approach, the P-47 came in level with the target and dropped the bombs directly onto it. Both methods were tried, using delayed action fusing on the bombs. Skip-bombing was used with great success against railway tunnels by P-47 units based in Italy, and Bennett had observed these missions at first-hand. As he told his pilots, 'You don't need water to skip bombs. You can bounce them off the dirt as well, though it takes some judgement. Sand, for instance, will cause a different rebound to hard earth or rocky ground'.

The 366th tried out its new technique on a bridge on 7 May, but subsequent reconnaissance photos showed inconclusive results. Another attempt was made the following day, Bennett having instructed his pilots to attack from a lower altitude – the results were much better. As the after action report stated, 'a double track, eight-span concrete railroad bridge across the Oise, near Hirson, was bombed. The attack was carried out in a leisurely fashion, the target was destroyed, and the pilots remained over the target to watch the debris float down the river'.

Bennett had led his aircraft in two flights at a time, with the next two following up half-a-mile behind. This gap allowed the smoke from the first explosions to clear, leaving the following flights to select an undam-

aged part of the bridge. Once back at base, Bennett stepped from his P-47 grinning from ear to ear and said, 'This is better than working for a living'.

On 9 May the 366th hit the Mohon railway bridge over the Meuse, near Mezières. Dropping 19 tons of bombs, the group knocked out the southern end of the bridge. After two days' stand-down for bad weather, the 366th – now known as 'Bennett's Bridge Busters' – sent 35 P-47s each loaded with two 1000-lb bombs to destroy a rail bridge used by coal trains to cross the Albert Canal, near Herenthals. Skilfully dropping their bombs amongst the underpinning, the pilots fatally weakened the bridge and down it came. A similar fate awaited an adjacent road bridge, as well as a secondary target bridge north of the town. Aircraft with bombs remaining then damaged yet another rail bridge across the Meuse.

Finally, the pilots pulverised the Albert Canal lock gates in a glide attack. That made five bridges destroyed and three damaged in six days – the kind of hectic pace that would soon become routine, and prove invaluable to advancing Allied troops on the continent.

On 21 May, Lt Col Bennett led a sweep in dreary and overcast conditions against the rail yards at Bayeaux. The 366th encountered both heavy and light flak surrounding the target, although this did not prevent pilots from liberally strafing locomotives, rolling stock, water towers, trucks and barracks. Bennett, himself, picked out a particularly well defended locomotive, which he riddled with 0.50-cal fire. However, as he came off the target, his P-47 was spotted trailing smoke which, at first, was thought by his No 3, James M Fogle, to be the characteristic exhaust trail from the aircraft's Pratt & Whitney R-2800 engine when running 'flat out'. It wasn't. Bennett's Thunderbolt had been badly hit.

Upon reaching the French coast at Port-en-Bessin, the P-47s were fired on again, and in an almost reflex action, Bennett led his pilots down to strafe the gun batteries, before heading out to sea. Aiming to coax his aircraft as far across the Channel as possible, where ASR would have an easier job locating him under the overcast, Bennett did not get far. After bailing out, he was last seen by three of his charges clambering into his rubber dinghy. Low on fuel, the pilots soon had to leave the area, attempting to send out Mayday calls on the emergency B Channel as per standard ETO procedure. This proved to be difficult, however, for the radio was jammed with distress calls from pilots flying flak-damaged aircraft back to England following a big fighter sweep that had also been flown that day.

A further cruel twist to this saga unfolded after two P-47s went back to look for Bennett. Whilst criss-crossing low over the water close to the French coast, the Americans were spotted by four Typhoon pilots, who were certain they had intercepted German fighters – there had been no time to alert Allied aircraft in the area to the presence of the 366th's impromptu rescue flight. Whether or not the RAF pilots failed to identify the P-47s for what they were, or they believed the American fighters to be in German hands, is unknown. They dived in and attacked, and after being struck by cannon fire, the Americans had little choice but to beat a hasty retreat. The upshot of all this was that Lt Col Don Bennett was not found, and the leadership of the 366th FG passed to Col Harold Holt, who would remain the group's CO until 28 April 1945.

Before the 366th had started to knock down bridges, the pilots' penchant for having Vargas pin-ups painted on their aircraft had apparently



Seen at a time when Ninth Air Force P-47s based in the UK flew with very plain identification markings as per AAF regulations, aircraft from the 36th FG taxi out for a sortie from Kingsnorth, led by 23rd FS P-47D-21 42-25984. Only after D-Day, when Thunderbolt units were based on the continent, did colour markings come back into vogue, although groups within the Ninth are not generally known for the recamouflaging of their natural metal P-47s. Indeed, aircraft looking much like these Thunderbolts would, in many cases, last out the war, with only the addition of squadron-based colour trim – yellow, in the case of the 23rd FS (IWM)

led someone to christen them the 'Vargas Boys'. This nickname was about to be adopted when 'Bennett's Bridge Busters' became more popular. However, after the loss of Don Bennett, the latter nickname seems to have fallen into disuse, probably as a mark of respect for an energetic and popular commander. This, and all similar group and squadron names, remained unofficial, being used by units in varying degrees. The AAF public relations branch liked to quote them in news releases, and many survived through that medium, where they made up for the general ban on using unit numbers and the location of fighter groups.

Escort operations still took Ninth Air Force fighters into Germany, and for the 365th FG, the after action reports for 29 May included details of the day's air combat, when German fighters were again sent up to intercept the bombers. The 'Hell Hawks' parried the Luftwaffe well, and a third victory went to Bob Coffey, who downed a Bf 109 north of Cordel.

Combar statistics reflected the fact that the invasion was near. Some 7369 effective Ninth Air Force sorties were flown in April (during which time the fighter units dropped just over 1000 tons of bombs for the loss of 53 aircraft), and in May the figures jumped to 19,479 sorties and over 3000 tons of bombs, which cost 78 fighters across all three types. On the credit side, the groups claimed to have destroyed 85.5 aircraft in the air and 74 on the ground, as well as the usual probable and damaged credits.

As part of the comprehensive planning for air support for *Overlord*, the Ninth Air Force allocated its fighter groups to the direct support of the US ground armies. This brought about a number of new tactical command designations, and a grouping of the operational units into wings.

By the eve of D-Day, Allied tactical aircraft had so devastated all lines of communication and military facilities available to the Germans to reinforce the defences in Normandy that with good fortune attending their endeavour, the invading forces would gain an early foothold. Having deluged forward airfields with bombs, AAF high command estimated that the *Jagdwaaffe*, having been obliged to pull its aircraft out of range of the Normandy beaches, would not be able to seriously oppose *Overlord*.

Eighth and Ninth Air Force aircraft had, in addition, destroyed literally hundreds of bridges, marshalling yards and storage facilities, not to mention V1 launching sites in France – indeed, no flying bombs would be launched to disrupt the seaborne assault. The Ninth was thus poised to sortie its fighters across the Channel to give close support to the beachhead, and to base its fighter groups on the continent as soon as possible.

INVASION SUPPORT

As the invasion of Europe proceeded under a continual umbrella of Allied airpower on the morning of 6 June 1944, the AAF fighter groups maintained a continuous cross-Channel 'shuttle service' in support of the troops fighting their way off the beaches of Normandy. Their targets during this period included blockhouses, dumps, rail sidings, troop concentrations, radar stations and road transport.

Not all the P-47 group got a 'ringside seat' of the invasion, however, with pilots of the 405th FG, in particular, being mightily disappointed to be handed patrol duty for RAF Coastal Command Liberators operating in the sector between their base at Christchurch and the Bay of Biscay. The 'Thunder Monsters' could do little but grit their collective teeth and get on with flying such sorties, which lasted from 0530 to 2300 hours, for four solid days on what they derisively termed 'The Caribbean Defence Patrol'. The enemy was conspicuous by his total absence in this important, but quiet, backwater, at least in terms of aerial combat. It was not until 10 June that the 405th returned to its dive-bombing mission, attacking a radar station at St Vaast-la-Hougue, north of Utah Beach.

Luftwaffe commanders, faced with one of their biggest challenges of the war, wisely kept their D-Day sorties to a minimum of about 70 – such was the strength of the Allies that it would have been suicidal to metaphorically 'raise heads too far above the parapet', although this is not to imply that the Ninth's fighters saw no evidence of the enemy in the air.

Within hours of the invasion getting underway, a Ninth Air Force Aviation Engineer Battalion had built a landing strip on Utah Beach, and by

When senior Allied commanders planned the composition of the loads carried by the first invasion transports to support the D-Day landings, US Aviation Engineer Battalions were given priority space for their heavy equipment. With the beachhead only hours old, the machinery required to 'carve out' airstrips in French farmland was ferried across the Channel and hauled ashore. The 368th FG was the first group to make the move to France, flying into the newly created strip at Cardonville (A-3) on 19 June – the first P-47s landed *before* the heavy graders had finished their work. This P-47D-15 of the 397th FS is seen undergoing maintenance at A-3 in late June (IWM HU 76213)



Having made the move to the continent, the Ninth's fighter groups could now give the army very close support during the vital first weeks of the invasion, without having to take into account the time-consuming two-way Channel flight. Again photographed at Cardonville, five pilots from the 397th FS use the wing of Thunderbolt as an impromptu map table during a pre-flight brief with a cigarette-smoking GI (IWM EA 26805)



P-47s were among the most numerous Allied aircraft in the Normandy area after D-Day. One of the first groups to fly into France was the 48th FG, which occupied Deaux Jumeaux (A-4), inland from Omaha Beach, on 28 June. Pilots faced many hazards in fighting a war in these previously quiet rural backwaters, not the least of which was livestock, which had a penchant for wandering around dispersals when the pace was less hectic. Fuel bowzers and constant human activity generally prevented this kind of accident, however. Miss Lace, of the 48th FG's 492nd FS, has probably had its fill of fuel as the bowser moves slowly on down the line (IWM EA 28060)

8 June an emergency fighter strip had been laid. There were no fixed facilities at these sites, and for a time they were used only during daylight hours to refuel and rearm aircraft. At dusk the units flew back to England.

The first AAF P-47 group to make a Channel crossing for a 'permanent' base change was the 368th FG on 19 June, followed by the 366th the next day and the 50th on the 25th. By then, the 354th and 371st FGs, equipped respectively with the P-51B and P-38J, were already in France. The rest of the Thunderbolt flew in over the following weeks, and all but one had completed the move by the end of July. Only the 474th, with P-38s, was left, and the group departed England on 6 August.

In general, the P-47 pilots were relieved to have left behind the temporary steel plating runways of the ALGs in England. These had, in some



cases, failed to stand up to the constant pounding of the five-ton Thunderbolts, leading to a number of serious accidents. England's notorious weather compounded the problems, as spring rain caused drainage problems that led to the waterlogging and sinking of the steel mats. Bent sections of mat would also tear and burst tyres, resulting in alarming 'roller coaster' take-off runs for aircraft laden with bombs, fuel and ammunition. These problems forced the closure of several ALGs, and resulted in the dangerous overcrowding of the remaining serviceable bases.

However, what the tactical fighter groups found in France was not a great deal better than the ALGs they had left behind in southern England – strips were often simple flat areas of countryside bordering orchards or open fields, with little in the way of local facilities. At most temporary locations, the familiar steel mat runway strips had been hastily laid to take the weight of bomb-laden P-47s.

When they were located in France, Ninth Air Force fighter groups came under the control of Maj Gen Elwood R 'Pete' Quesada, who commanded IX Tactical Air Command (TAC). The units that remained in England were concurrently grouped in XIX TAC, commanded by Maj Gen Otto P Weyland.

With the Eighth Air Force generally handling the Luftwaffe's reaction to the invasion, and the RAF's 2nd Tactical Air Force (TAF) pounding ground targets in the area of the beachhead, the Ninth was left to get on with flying its own close support missions. Air action more frequently occurred when the P-47s and P-38s ranged further inland to help keep the Normandy area sealed off, and on 24 June a luckless Ju 52 crew had no idea that the Thunderbolt pilot who shot their transport down over a forest south of Creil aerodrome had almost become an ace the moment



While the invasion beachhead was being firmly established, the P-47 squadrons in England maintained a constant 'shuttle service' to targets in Normandy. This 492nd FS P-47D was photographed being refuelled and rearmed between missions at Ibsley just days prior to the 48th FG's move to France (AAHS/H S Moseley)



One of the crack P-47 outfits in the Ninth Air Force was the 365th FG, known as the 'Hell Hawks'. Among its many accomplishments was that it produced three aces, the first of these being Lt Col Robert L Coffey. Having shot down two enemy aircraft with 'razorback' Thunderbolts, he used this P-47D-25 – photographed at Beaulieu (Station 408) on D-Day – to claim two Bf 109s and a Ju 52 between 24 June and 5 July. Nicknamed COFFEY'S POT, this Thunderbolt was one of the earliest 'bubbletops' to be delivered to the 'Hell Hawks' (via J V Crow)

It became quite common for pilots of the 365th FG to present their names, and those of their groundcrew, on an insignia blue or black panel – this also proved to be a convenient place for adding the pilot's individual victories and sortie tally. Barely visible here are Lt Col Coffey's victories (eight shown, six of which were officially credited in the air), presented as black crosses with white outlines at the top of the panel. Coffey, who was attached to the 365th FG's HQ flight, had his aircraft maintained by the 388th FS – he had served as CO of this unit from June through to December 1943 (via J V Crow)



his guns stopped firing. By that time, Bob Coffey had four kills. Perhaps the fact that the 365th FG were now flying some of the first 'bubbletop' P-47D-25s issued to Ninth Air Force units had added an element of good luck to Coffey's aim – this was the third P-47 he had scored a victory in.

There is the distinct possibility that Coffey believed he was already an ace, although his 24 March 'damaged' was never officially confirmed as destroyed. Indeed, it was not unusual for there to be such a time lag in processing claims that some pilots only found out they had, in fact, reached ace status in the years after the war!

Conversely, there were many more instances when the rows of swastikas, or iron crosses, on the flanks of P-47s were metaphorically reduced in numbers in terms of confirmed victories. The Ninth Air Force had its own way of recording the results of air combats, and the considerable number of ground victories scored by pilots were not officially counted towards personal scores (see appendix one). This seems anomalous, considering that the Ninth's fighter-bomber groups were often sent out specifically to destroy enemy aircraft on the ground!

This front view of Bob Coffey's aircraft clearly shows his personal insignia to advantage. Boasting full Allied Expeditionary Air Forces stripes (a rare sight on a P-47D-25, because few 'bubbletops' had been delivered by 6 June 1944), the aircraft carries 1000-lb bombs on the wing racks and a decorated centreline 108-gal drop tank (via J V Crow)





A tornado of fire rather than wind came down on the enemy every time Capt Howard J Curran of the 510th FS/405th FG ventured over the frontline. His well marked P-47D-25 42-26742, coded 2Z-D, recorded sorties in the form of tiny aeroplanes, with bombs for high explosive deliveries and swastikas for aerial victories. These scoreboards often represented ground rather than aerial kills, despite a Ninth Air Force ruling that such claims could not be made official. Curran later painted a fifth kill on this aircraft, and was duly hailed by his local newspaper as the first ace from the Pratt County area of Kansas. He was, however, only officially credited with two victories (via Campbell)

Having parked his aircraft on the appropriate dispersal at Picaudville (A-8), west of Utah Beach, Lt Gabriel Greenwood surveys the 405th FG's new base on 30 June. The pilot had just completed the short flight from Christchurch, in Dorset, to France, along with the rest of the 511th FS's B Flight. The 405th marked its aircraft up with canopy framing and nose/tail bands in the various squadron colours – yellow for the 511th, red for 507th and blue for the 510th. Greenwood's P-47D-20 carried the name *Knobby* on its starboard cowling (via J V Crow)

By contrast, the Eighth Air Force *did* count ground kills towards an individual's score – however, whether or not an aircraft that was shot up on an airfield, but not seen to explode or burn, could be considered a total loss remained a contentious issue in numerous cases.

June's combat figures for Ninth Air Force fighters had, not surprisingly, spiralled compared with those of April and May. Effective sorties were a third more at 28,192, with the bomb tonnage reaching 7758. Aerial claims for aircraft destroyed reached 196.5, and 36 on the

ground. The price was correspondingly higher, with 261 fighters lost.

JULY 1944

Early July saw the 'Hell Hawks' again in combat with the Luftwaffe, and on this occasion Lt Col Coffey made sure of his ace status. Again flying P-47D-25 42-26407 (appropriately nicknamed *COFFEY'S POT*), he was flying low over the Forêt de St Euroult when he spotted a Bf 109, which he quickly destroyed. Three days later, Coffey downed a sixth Bf 109 over Dreux, which turned out to be his last victory in the ETO.

On 11 July *COFFEY'S POT* fell victim to the fighter-bomber's deadliest foe – flak. Struck whilst attacking an airfield near the French city of Angers, Coffey managed to belly-land his P-47. And judging from photos taken by a German soldier of the downed aircraft, which show its cockpit alight, the pilot tried to destroy the Thunderbolt in order to prevent it being salvaged by the enemy. Whether or not the Germans appreciated the changes that had been made to the Republic fighter from their examination of the wreckage is not known. Indeed, they may have already possessed data pertaining to the 'bubbletop' model. Coffey successfully evaded capture, and arrived back in England on 6 August.

Under the prevailing AAF rules, a pilot who had escaped from behind enemy lines was not allowed to return to combat in the same theatre. Such measures were taken in order to avoid those who helped the pilot being exposed during interrogation should the latter be shot down for a second





time and captured. Bob Coffey was duly transferred to Ninth Air Force headquarters, rather than to another theatre of war, which was an alternative option given to pilots who returned after evading.

As the fighter-bomber groups prepared to make an early move to bases in France, so too did their ground control radar units. Operating microwave early warning (MEW) sets, these units would prove vital in the fighter groups' efforts to achieve successful air support over the forthcoming battleground of Europe. Carefully planned ground-air liaison, maintained by fighter pilots riding in ground vehicles on a rotational basis, brought a whole new reality to the term 'close air support'.

Field commanders praised the fighter-bombers for the pin-point destruction of single blockhouses, groups of tanks and pockets of enemy troops in precision attacks that could not be achieved by any other means. P-47s often blasted positions located only yards in front of friendly forces.

With the deployment of Lt Gen George S Patton's Third Army, XIX TAC moved from England to take over IX TAC's groups based on the continent. The arrival of the new command brought about a division of responsibility, and this was achieved by IX TAC concentrating on ground-air co-operation for close air support, while aircraft assigned to XIX TAC ranged beyond the battlefield to interdict a long list of important enemy targets.



This dispersal scene, taken at Azeville (A-7) in July, features P-47D-25 42-26541 of the 386th FS/365th FG, christened *Beautiful* by its pilot – note the appropriate rendering of the lady in question adorning the fighter's cowlings. Again, a contrasting colour panel has been used to depict the pilot's score, the small stencilled marks getting increasingly numerous as the P-47s flew multiple missions each day. A visiting A-20 from the 647th BS/410th BG (note the group's distinctive black and white rudder marking) is visible in the left background. The Havoc group was still based in England at Gosfield (Station 154), in Essex, when this photo was taken (via Greg Morcera & Henry Kloosen)

Seen this time from the front, P-47D-25 42-26541 appears to show no ill effects from the numerous combat sorties it had flown since arriving in the ETO soon after D-Day. From this angle, the sun, or the type of film stock used by the photographer, has made the data panel beneath the cockpit of *Beautiful* appear to be white in colour. The 'Hell Hawks' fought a tough war in the weeks after D-Day, and then suffered further casualties on New Year's Day 1945, when the mass Luftwaffe airfield attack (Operation *Bodenplatte*) wiped out virtually an entire squadron of Thunderbolts on the ground at St Dizier (A-64) (via Greg Morcera & Henry Kloosen)



The end of *COFFEY'S POT*, shot down by flak whilst attacking an airfield near Angers on 11 July 1944. The original of this photograph was found on a captured German soldier, who was possibly from the flak battery responsible for shooting the P-47 down

'Orange Tails' in the snow. Aside from their distinctive all-orange tail surfaces, the 358th FG also adorned its P-47s with unique (for the Ninth Air Force) all-letter codes, which harked back to the group's original ETO assignment with the 'Mighty Eighth'. Initially, the Eighth's frontline groups used all letters while the Ninth employed a letter-numeral combination, but the system overlapped to a considerable degree as the number of operational units in-theatre increased. This P-47D-30 was assigned to the 358th FG's 366th FS (USAF)

On the penultimate day of July 1944, Capt Robert D Johnston of the 50th FG shot down an Fw 190 over Villedien les Poeles for his first victory. An experienced pilot who had been a part of the group since mid-1942, Johnston was serving as the 81st FS's operations officer, flying a P-47D-22 from Carentan (A-10), when he claimed his kill. Promoted to major in September, and made boss of the 81st FS, Johnston was destined to become his unit's sole ace – a feat he finally achieved in April 1945.

Having flown sorties as armoured column cover on 29 July, and destroyed a number of enemy tanks, the 404th FG was briefed for much the same type of operation on the 30th. In the afternoon, the Luftwaffe appeared in the shape of 20 Bf 109s, and the 507th FS had a fight on its hands. They were swiftly chased off, less two of their number, which were despatched by Capt Thomas A Weller, who saw the pilots bail out – although he admitted that neither fighter appeared to be fatally damaged.

Sister-squadron, the 506th FS, was actually engaged whilst bombing by nine Fw 190s, whose pilots were a little more dedicated to their task. It availed them little, for the Americans reacted quickly. Lt Max W Conn exploded one Focke-Wulf and hit and damaged a second, before he was himself attacked by a third. At that moment, Lt Earl Fisher came off his bombing run to come face to face with another Fw 190. He turned inside



it, latched onto the fighter's tail and shot it down. Fisher then had to break hard to avoid a closing Fw 190, before positioning himself behind another German fighter and pumping bullets into it until the pilot was persuaded to bail out. Continuing to turn, Fisher then saw Conn's predicament and managed to chase the pursuing fighter away.

Fisher's wingman, Lt Charles R

Hansen, then watched two Fw 190s coming straight at him, before turning into them. All three fighters continued turning until the American got the edge and shot one of his assailants down. Lt Eugene J McCloskey, wingman to Conn, also got himself an Fw 190 that suddenly flew into his sights. Despite it making a tight evasive turn as the P-47 pilot opened fire, the Focke-Wulf was seen to dive into the ground.

Flushed with a score of seven, the 404th's long summer day had not yet ended, for the 507th FS flew an evening mission to Avranches at around 2000 hours. During the transit a group of 18 Bf 109s were chased off, but flight leader Capt George C Hughes spotted two more Messerschmitts. With his wingman, Lt John J Rogers, Hughes stole up on the enemy aircraft. Both American pilots fired, and both Bf 109s went down, the Germans seemingly unaware of the danger. Then, Lt John C Ross found another Bf 109, turned inside it and shot it down too, taking the group's tally to 15 kills for the day – the 404th FG's *total* tally up to that point in the war had been a mere five aircraft shot down in aerial combat!

AUGUST 1944

Ninth Air Force P-47 units (particularly the low-numbered 36th, 48th and 50th FGs) have generally received little coverage in contemporary publications, although their work was well documented during the war. Regular despatches from the European front gave details of particularly effective missions, the progress of the ground war and some of the notable pilots. Granted, the groups' exploits do not feature huge air battles with the Luftwaffe, instead listing bridges smashed, tanks destroyed, enemy positions cleared and troops routed – none of which catch the imagination in the same way as dogfights in defence of heavy bombers.

While a substantial number of the Ninth's P-47 pilots bettered the enemy by bringing down less than five, it happened that certain individuals were, unbeknown to them at the time, only en route to a final aerial victory score which made them aces in another war. One such pilot was Capt Royal N Baker of the 48th FG, who had previously destroyed three enemy aircraft – all of them flying Spitfire V/VIII with the 308th FS/31st FG in Italy in 1943. Having transferred to the 48th FG in November 1943, Baker (nicknamed 'The King') served as the 493rd FS's operations officer. On 5 August 1944 he had a go at a Bf 109 over the Brecey area and was awarded a half-kill. That was to be Baker's final credit during World War 2, ace status eluding him until 1952, when he was flying something a little more lethal than a P-47 – namely an F-86 over Korea. He would score a further 12 and 2 shared kills in the latter conflict.



This P-47D-21 (coded 'G9-A') has previously been identified as an aircraft of the Eighth Air Force's 56th FG, when it was, in fact, a Ninth Air Force aircraft of the 509th FS/405th FG. The personal maul of group operations officer Maj Paul Gardiner, it was posted missing over France on 18 June. Although the Thunderbolt was not being flown by him on this date, in a cruel twist of fate Gardiner too was shot down by flak near St Lo (flying P-47D-15 42-75656) that very same day! One of three 405th FG P-47s lost on 18 June, 'HUCKLE DE BUCK' was being piloted by Lt Harold T Hersey. Both Gardiner and Hersey evaded capture, making it back to England in July and September respectively. Sadly, the third pilot shot down on the 18th, 2Lt C E King (in P-47D-15 42-76361), was killed

SOUTHERN FRONT

As the air war in Western Europe was showing definite all round gains for the Allied cause as the winter of 1943 approached, great strides had also been made on the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations (MTO). With the successful termination of campaigns against the Axis in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Sicily, plans could now be executed to chase the retreating Germans into Italy. Further operations for the successful prosecution of the war in this theatre were boosted by the capitulation of the Italians on 3 September 1943. Under a far-reaching reorganisation of Allied air forces in the MTO instigated just two months later, the Fifteenth Air Force was formed on 1 November, with Maj Gen James H Doolittle in command.

Upon its formation, the Fifteenth took over the Twelfth Air Force's six heavy bomb groups, three P-38 fighter groups and a solitary outfit equipped with P-47s – namely, the 325th FG, comprised of the 317th, 318th and 319th FSs. On the face of it, this fighter force looked sufficiently capable of escorting the 'heavies', which were now working through an expanded list of German targets. However, most of the fighter groups were considerably under strength in terms of serviceable aircraft.

Being the sole single-engined fighter group in the Fifteenth Air Force upon its formation, the 325th FG shouldered the task of supporting the P-38s in their coverage of the large heavy bomber force which provided the striking power of the new strategic air arm. Under the Combined Bomber Offensive plan, and as specified in the *Poinblanc* Directive, bomb groups based in North Africa had previously attacked targets in Italy and Germany that hastened the destruction of the *Jagdwaaffe* as a viable fighting force. And although there were numerous other AAF fighter groups in the MTO as part of the Twelfth Air Force, these were equipped with P-39s, P-40s and Spitfires, all of which were unsuitable for long-range escort. The Fifteenth would later receive a number of P-51B/C-equipped groups, but not until well into 1944.

A spell of bad weather, and the resulting low number of bomber missions flown through to the end of 1943, gave the four fighter groups the chance to consolidate their strength. Nevertheless, the P-38 and P-47 pilots still found themselves busy, as they were also obliged to escort medium bombers, as well as B-17s and B-24s. And when they were not briefed for escort missions, the fighter pilots went out in search of targets on the ground.

The Germans had not contested the invasion of southern Italy to any great degree, and the British landings at Taranto went ahead almost unmolested on 9 September 1943. That same day the US Fifth Army went ashore at Salerno, and they met with fierce opposition. How-

Although better known for their spectacular black and yellow checkered tails, the group's initial batch of Thunderbolts were very plain indeed, as this P-47D-10 seen at Foggia in late 1943 proves. The group received its first dozen P-47D-6s and D-10s as P-40F replacements in September, and after a period of pilot conversion training in Tunisia, the premier Thunderbolt mission (involving no fewer than 48 aircraft) took place on 14 December. Older D-models like this particular aircraft had been passed to the Twelfth Air Force's 57th and 79th FGs before the end of January 1944, the 325th taking delivery of longer ranged D-15s and D-16s in their place. By that time the red-bordered national insignia seen here on 42-75023 should have been painted out, but the lack of any Japanese threat in the MTO served to delay things for several months! (Lt Col A G Schneider via S Blake)





Quickly appreciating the rugged qualities of the P-47 in comparison with their old Warhawks, the 'Checkertail Clan' soon began to rack up air combat victories on long-range escort missions. The first P-47 kill occurred on 30 December 1943, but the big day for the unit was 30 January 1944, when a surprise attack on Italian airfields netted 38 victories, six of which fell to leading 325th FG Thunderbolt ace 'Herky' Green (via McDowell)

1Lt Roy B Hogg is seen wearing a satisfied grin after returning from the 30 January mission, during which he used only 40 rounds of 0.50-in ammunition to shoot down a Macchi C 202 and a Bf 109. This double haul took Hogg's score to four (he had two kills from the 318th FS's P-40F days), and he would have to wait until 6 June to 'make ace', downing two Fw 190s whilst flying P-51B-15 43-24877 (via McDowell)



August 1942 (he was the first CO of the 319th FS), Baseler was a skilled commander, and with the transition proceeding to plan, the 'Checkertail Clan' were soon ready to add to their already impressive war record. Intervention of the rainy season saw the group move to Soliman, also in Tunisia, on 4 November when Mateur became waterlogged.

As it was agreed that the missions to be flown by the higher performance P-47 would be significantly different from those undertaken with the P-40, three Eighth Air Force pilots with Thunderbolt experience were seconded to the 325th. The trio included Maj Lewis W 'Bill' Chick, who had spent virtually all of 1943 in England firstly with the 336th FS/4th FG (flying both Spitfires and P-47s), followed by the 355th FG, before being posted to the Combat Operations Center of VIII FC HQ to 'fly' a desk. These pilots arrived just as the 'Clan' moved again, this time to Italy.

On 9 December the first transit flights got underway, the pilots flying their aircraft to the Foggia area, where a complex of airfields would ably support initial Allied air operations over Italy. The move took longer than expected, however, due to bad weather, and some P-47s did not arrive until the 11th. Still awaiting elements of its ground echelon, the group nevertheless undertook its first sorties from Foggia Main on the 14th.

This initial bomber escort to targets in Greece produced little to get excited about, and neither did the next four missions, which were also escorts. On the last one, a strafing attack was made on an airfield at Ancona, and Bill Chick took a considerable risk by firing on a well defended boat. Other pilots found road and rail transport to shoot up.

Ironically, the first aerial kills claimed by the P-47 in the MTO fell to the fighter-bomber optimised 57th FG, which operated as part of the Twelfth Air Force. A combat-seasoned group (it was the first US fighter unit in the Middle East, serving as part of the 'old' Ninth Air Force, before transferring to the Twelfth), the 57th FG had flown P-40Fs in North Africa from October 1942 until it transitioned to P-47s on 28 November 1943 at Amendolara, south-west of Taranto.

The 57th scored its first kills with the Thunderbolt on 16 December, when two Bf 109s fell to 1Lt Al Froning of the 65th FS in the Trpanj area of Yugoslavia. These two victories took the pilot's score to the magical five figure, for he had previously claimed two Ju 52s and a Bf 109 during the closing stages of the North African campaign in late April.



Generally speaking, P-47s reached Twelfth Air Force units in the MTO after the early air combat phase had passed, and like Al Froning, most pilots that had scored kills with these groups had enjoyed their successes while flying P-40Fs. Indeed, as a rule, the fighter groups within the Twelfth had even less opportunity to combat the Luftwaffe than those in the Ninth, their modest tallies of aerial victories confirming the predominantly ground attack nature of their work.

JANUARY 1944

The early build up of the Fifteenth Air Force in Italy was accomplished at a rapid pace, and by January 1944 there were eight bomb groups in place — four each with B-24s and B-17s, and with more preparing to move to the MTO from America. It had been decided that the 325th would fly escort missions almost exclusively, weather permitting.

The early P-47 period was marred by a number of crashes and fatalities, with three pilots having been killed in weather-related accidents on Christmas Day alone. Greeted by a quagmire when the group moved base again to Celone (Foggia One) on 30 December, the 'Clan' nevertheless met the schedule and flew a mission the same day. They were rewarded with three Bf 109s destroyed, and a fourth claimed by future 317th FS ace Capt Herschel H Green, although this was never officially confirmed.

When the weather improved, Celone proved to be a pleasant enough base, and the 'Clan' settled into a pattern of shepherding the 'heavies' to such targets as Sofia, Wiener Neustadt, Fiume and Rome. These sorties were part of the outline plan known as Operation *Strangle*, which was an all-out effort by the Allies to isolate the Axis forces in southern Italy by cutting off their flow of supplies coursing in from Germany, via Austria. To protect the bombers, the fighters were given free reign to mount

Some of the 325th FG pilots who took part in the Villaorba strike of 30 January pose for a group shot after returning from the mission. They are, from left to right, standing, 'Herky' Green, Gene Emmons, Bill Chick, J C Doerty, George Novotny, John L Brower and Gerry Edwards. Sitting, from left to right, unidentified, Cecil Dean, Walt Walker, Edsel Paulk and Neil Carol. Seven of these pilots would be aces by the time their tours ended (via McDowell)

Maj 'Herky' Green polishes up his 'ace' in this well-known AAF PR photo. The inspiration for this painting was a Vargas calendar cowgirl, which proved to be a very popular 'model' for aircraft nose-art during World War 2. Not given to much embellishment of his aircraft, apart from a log of kills, Green usually flew a P-47D numbered '11'. Periodically, however, he was obliged to fly other aircraft on combat missions when 'his' P-47 was unserviceable, or undergoing routine maintenance. Commander of the 317th FS between March and September 1944, Green finished the war as the ranking AAF ace in the MTO. He was also amongst the select few to score victories on all three fighter types that equipped the 325th during the war, namely the Warhawk, Thunderbolt and Mustang. Green's final tally of 18 destroyed, 1 probable and 6 damaged was scored between 19 May 1943 and 23 August 1944 (via McDowell)



sweeps against enemy airfields. And although these missions were not completed without losses, the 325th had been credited with 15 confirmed kills (all over airfields around Rome) by the end of the third week of January.

Three of these fell to Warhawk ace Capt Frank 'Spot' Collins of the 319th FS, whose single Bf 109 on the 13th was followed by two Messerschmitts destroyed (and a third damaged) nine days later. Maj Chick, who was now boss of the 317th FS, also enjoyed success against the ubiquitous Bf 109, downing single examples on the 19th and 22nd.

ANZIO

With the Germans having consolidated their airpower in the north of Italy, they were able to pose a considerable threat not only to Allied heavy bombers, but also to ground forces which had successfully landed at Anzio on 22 January, only to pause, before moving inland. This delay was to cost the Allies dearly, for it gave Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, C-in-C of all German forces in Italy, the opportunity to quickly rush eight divisions into the region to pin down Allied troops, and establish a strong perimeter around the beachhead. A small coastal town in southern Italy soon became synonymous with a perceived lack of Allied boldness, and the 'race' to Rome had to be postponed.

At the time of the invasion, the 325th's Thunderbolts lacked the striking pattern of black and yellow checkers which had been introduced on the vertical tail surfaces of their P-40Fs in mid-1943. This was primarily due to a shortage of paint, and for weeks the group's 'razorback' P-47Ds looked plain in standard camouflage, with white fuselage identification numbers – fortunately, white paint *was* available! Some machines also had the short-lived red outline to their 'stars and bars' insignia, which had been introduced in June 1943 and supposedly superseded by a blue outline just three months later. However, in this theatre, and other across the globe, painting aircraft per the regulations took time.

In early 1944 the 325th's pilot roster still included a number of individuals who had either become aces during the later stages of the fighting in North Africa flying the Warhawk, or who had scored less than five victories, but whose service extended into the P-47 period. Members of this 'club' included Herschel Green, Frank Collins, Robert Baseler and George Novotny, whilst a handful of 'Clan' pilots, including Green, would remain in the MTO long enough finish their tours flying the P-51.

Like most of the group's combat veterans, 2Lt George Novotny made the transition from P-40 to P-47 easily enough. As with his squadroommates, he flew the Thunderbolt for some 20 hours prior to being deemed 'checked out' in the fighter. Having scored three kills with the P-40 (a Macchi C.202 and two Bf 109s), Novotny anticipated further combat:

'After Salerno, they took the 325th off operations and we got P-47s – all sub-types between the D-6 and D-16. I was assigned P-47D No 27. When we moved to Italy, the weather was stinking, with lots of rain and overcast. The group was based at Foggia Main, the airfield nearest to the city. We spent about three weeks there before we moved to Foggia One (Celone), as a result of the weather and the many other Allied aircraft crowded into the field – Wellingtons, Spitfires, P-40s and so on. I flew my first escort mission on 15 January 1944.'

In order to reduce the threat posed by Luftwaffe fighters and bombers at bases in northern Italy, a maximum effort was laid on to strike four enemy airfields in late January. The 325th FG would hit the airfield at Villaorba first, and immediately after the P-47s had worked over the targets, a substantial force of AAF 'heavies' would plaster the runways, dispersals and hangars with high explosive. It was hoped that this two-pronged attack would substantially reduce the huge concentration of Ju 88s and Do 217s that intelligence had recently confirmed as being based at Villaorba.

Flying at 50 ft (well below radar detection height), the 325th sent every available P-47 off on the morning of 30 January. They flew low over the Adriatic, before initiating a long climb in order to allow them to commence dive-bombing runs on the target from between 15,000 and 19,000 ft. While the Luftwaffe's radar operators picked up the approaching 'heavies', they failed to detect the P-47s, and almost complete surprise was achieved when some 60 white-starred fighters came screaming down in power dives. The attack was led by aircraft of the 319th FS, with the 317th to the left and the 318th on the right. George Novotny remembers;

'It was a real sight to see 60 aircraft coming out of the mist and climbing to make the attack. The way we did it was to have the 319th down on the deck, with the 317th at 20,000 ft and the 318th at 30,000 ft to provide medium altitude and top cover for the attack.'

Winging over from 19,000 ft, the Thunderbolt pilots watched a mass of enemy aircraft frantically scrambling to take off from the airfield. Opening the attack shortly before noon, the 325th enjoyed what amounted to a 35-minute 'turkey shoot'. Leading the P-47s was Herschel Green, who personally accounted for six Axis aircraft – four Ju 52s, a Do 217 and an C 202. 'Herky' had thus achieved 'ace in a day' status on this memorable mission, flying a borrowed aircraft – his own P-47D (No 11)



Obviously pleased about the fact that he was about to go home, Maj Lewis 'Bill' Chick was CO of the 317th FS immediately prior to 'Herky' Green. Having seen combat in the ETO with both the 4th and 355th FGs, prior to being sent to the 325th FG to help in its conversion onto the Thunderbolt, Chick left the 317th FS on 25 March 1944, having scored six victories – all on the P-47. The aircraft parked behind Chick in this photograph (P-47D-15 42-75737) was the regular mount of fellow 'Checkertail' ace, Lt Eugene H Emmons, who used it to down four of his nine kills. Note that even by late March 1944, some of the 325th FG's Thunderbolts had still not received their distinctive black and yellow tail markings (via McDowell)



P-47D '66' ROWDY, flown by Lt Sam E Brown of the 318th FS, gets its first victory symbol after the mission of 3 March. Brown was able to add a further two swastikas for a total of three enemy aircraft destroyed during his tour with the 'Checkertails'. Just visible forward of the aircraft's nickname is the red cowl band introduced by the 325th FG during the spring of 1944 (via McDowell)



was in the maintenance shop that day, so he was flying Lt Bunn Hearn's P-47D *Star of Altoona* instead.

Green experienced few problems on the mission, although he had to prematurely curtail his personal decimation of the Luftwaffe when he thought he had expended all his ammunition. It was common practise in the 325th to only half-load the P-47's wing guns in an effort to save weight and improve performance. However, on this occasion Bunn Hearn's armourers had loaded the full 800 rounds per gun. This may well have been because Hearn, who was the group's executive officer, probably flew less frequently than the other pilots. In any event, Green would not have been aware of this in the air, as the full ammunition load was made up by clipping two 400-round belts together. And it was standard procedure for each belt to have the last five rounds as tracer ammunition to warn the pilot that he was about to run out. As 'Herky' Green later quipped, "The punch line is that I had actually landed with more ammunition remaining than I thought I had at mission start!"

Along with Green, Novotny, Dean and Paulk made up the flight of four, which was known as the 'Fearless Foursome'. Novotny, who claimed three kills to 'make ace', fills in the details of subsequent events:

'We clobbered the field well. Some enemy aircraft bellied in when they saw what was going on, and as well as the main combat types we tore up. I saw an Hs 123 biplane (later credited to him as an Hs 126). I hit him head on with eight "fifties", so there wasn't much left of him.'

As the fighters ranged across the airfield at 'zero feet', 76 B-17s droned into view to release their loads from 23,000 ft. Deadly showers of fragmentation bombs – 10,988 of them – exploded over Villaorba. Three minutes before midday, Maniago airfield received similar treatment from a smaller force of Fortresses, whilst Lavariano and Udine were carpet bombed just after midday, the total effort on 30 January involving 215 B-17s and B-24s. Just three bombers were lost to flak and fighter attack.

Bill Chick's haul on this day was two Bf 109s, both of which went down over Villaorba. The second combat had an interesting sequel years later;

'I met this man in Lima, Peru, while serving as the chief of the air mission to Bolivia, in La Paz. From his accent I knew he was German, so I asked him what he was doing during World War 2, and he told me he was a Bf 109 pilot. Asked if he was ever shot down, he replied, "Three times,

'Black and yellow paint was on back order', Bill Chick explained in a note attached to this photo of his P-47D-16 42-76021, sans checkers.

Although this photograph is not of great quality, it nevertheless shows the aircraft's white identification number '10', and the name *Rocky* below the cockpit. Chick used this aircraft to down his fifth and sixth kills (both Bf 109s) on 14 February and 3 March (via McDowell)

Bill Chick was amused by the publicity ('home town hero') he received upon 'making ace' on 14 February 1944, a feat the 'folks back home' in Twin Sisters, Blanco County, Texas, were able to read about in their newspapers courtesy of Allied HQ in Algiers (Chick)



'The paint came in!', Bill Chick's note for this photo exclaimed. This aircraft was almost certainly P-47D-16 42-76021 once again. The black and yellow paint was about two months overdue, and the bulk of the group's aircraft did not receive their 'checkers' until the spring of 1944. This undoubtedly pleased the groundcrews, who had the unenviable task of painting dozens of P-47s with this distinctive marking (Chick)

Christened "THUNDERBOLT LAD" by future 319th FS ace 1Lt Bob Barkey, P-47D-15 42-75629 was photographed at Lesina soon after it had been used by him to score his third confirmed kill on 18 March 1944. Barkey claimed four victories and a probable with the Thunderbolt, and eventually 'made ace' flying a P-51B on 6 June (via McDowell)



and I waved goodbye. He then said, "I think you shot me down"!

Bill Chick's tour in Bolivia lasted two years, and during that time he and the German became friends, and met regularly – no doubt to discuss further the coincidences and sheer chance inherent in war.

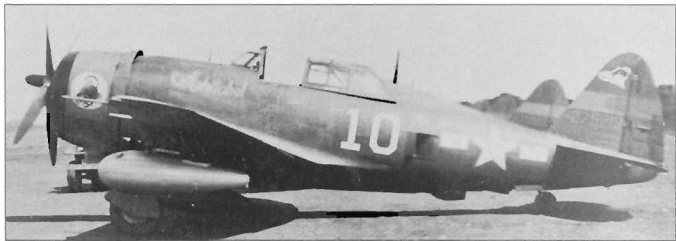
'When we got back (to base)', recalls George Novotny, 'Gen Twining (Commander of the Fifteenth Air Force) arrived to present Bob Baseler with an immediate Silver Star – it was quite a deal!'

Baseler was credited with a single Ju 88 destroyed on this mission, bringing final tally of kills to six. It would be the only victory he would achieve on the P-47, having 'made ace' on 26 July 1943 in the P-40F.

As previously noted, George Novotny claimed three kills (two Ju 52s and an Hs 126) during this mission to take his tally to the magical-five figure. He would later add a further two victories (and two damaged) in March/April to make him a full P-47 ace.

The success of these airfield attacks allowed the Fifteenth Air Force's 'heavies' to enjoy a valuable respite from the *Jagdwaaffe*. Some 60 Luftwaffe aircraft were reportedly destroyed, and valuable repair and servicing facilities lost. Widespread destruction and damage of Axis aircraft on the ground had helped break the back of the enemy in North Africa, and this early strike in Italy was repeating a proven formulae. The Luftwaffe, which was increasingly obliged to post units back to Germany to defend the Reich (often against the same heavy





bombers which were based in Italy) was becoming increasingly unable to replace personnel losses in order to present a force to be reckoned with.

Continuing to fly cover to Fifteenth Air Force bombers, the 325th's P-47s shared escort duty with the P-38 groups that had likewise transferred from the Twelfth Air Force. As George Novotny recalls;

'The way it usually worked was that the P-38s went out with the bombers and the P-47s brought them home when the Lightnings left, low on fuel. I loved the P-47. I'd always had the feeling that we had been flying "defensively" during our P-40 period, but with the P-47, that feeling went. We could do some real damage with the aircraft, and with 165-gal tanks, we could stay up for a good six hours.

'It generally happened that the enemy tried to reduce the effectiveness of our escort by putting up a few aircraft – often only two – to get us to drop our tanks early in the mission. We got wise to this, and allocated two P-47s to attack these decoys, while the rest continued with the escort mission and kept their tanks on until they ran dry, as intended.'

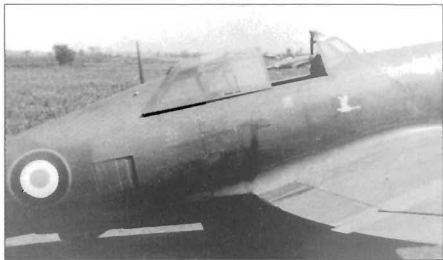
Out again on 31 January, the 'Checkertails' continued their run of good luck when, over Venice, the 317th FS encountered Bf 109s and SM 82 transports. Capt William A Rynne shot down two Bf 109s and Lt F E Suehle one, while Lts Richard Dunkin and Cullen Hoffman each nailed a transport. Rynne, Dunkin and Hoffman all later became aces.

FEBRUARY 1944

On St Valentine's Day the 325th ran across a gaggle of Bf 109Gs equipped with rocket tubes. It was the first time the Thunderbolt pilots had observed these weapons being carried by the German fighter, and they also noted that some C 202s were part of the enemy force. Wading in, the Americans emerged victorious some 30 minutes later, with seven claims. Lt Emmons got one of each type to add to his identical claims of 30 January, while Maj Chick 'bagged' a Bf 109 to make him an ace. Single Messerschmitts also fell to the guns

Aside from the 325th FG in Italy, a handful of P-47-equipped Twelfth Air Force groups were also making a significant contribution to winning the war in the MTO from bases on Corsica. The 57th FG at Alto was one such outfit, flying the usual mix of 'razorback' models – most of which sported striking badges derived from the component squadrons. P-47D-10 42-75213 was part of the 57th FG's 64th FS, known as the 'Black Scorpions'. With few chances to meet the enemy in the air, the group failed to produce an ace (via Campbell)

Just up the road from Alto was the newly-constituted French unit GC II/3, which flew its early missions with the 57th so as to gain experience on the P-47, before moving to France. Initially operating 'razorbacks', the unit was the first of six *Groupes de Chasse* to fly Thunderbolts during the war. This GC II/3 P-47 wears the greyhound and stork badge in traditional dual unit style (via J V Crow)



In line with French tradition, the starboard side of all *Armée de l'Air* P-47s carried the badge of the parent *Groupe de Chasse* – in this case the stork ('*Cigogne*') of 2e *Escadrille 'La Fayette'*. An aircraft that has seen a considerable amount of service, this particular P-47D may be the same one shown on the previous page. In any event, it was typical of early French Thunderbolts in service with GC II/3 on Corsica during 1944, although it lacks the large fuselage numbers that were similar in style to those of 'sister' unit, the 57th FG (via J V Crow)



of Lts Mock, Malloy and Clark. On the debit side, Lt Davis was wounded, having to force-land his P-47 upon returning to base.

Ten days later, the 325th FG's Lt John Forrest found himself alone with eight Bf 109s after being forced to break off a bomber escort mission to Austria with engine maladies. Obviously aware that the options left open to him were slim at best, Forrest turned into his assailants – and realised that he had an edge. Evidently, the enemy pilots had not spotted him, and when they finally did, two of them collided trying to take avoiding action. The resulting fireball shook the remaining pilots so badly that they hastily fled!

Not that the 'Clan' had things all their own way. There had already been casualties in the first weeks of 1944, and on 25 February, when the group was scheduled for an escort to Klagenfurt, Lt Clifford White's aircraft lost power on take-off and crashed fatally into Lake Lesina. Eighteen out of nineteen P-47s flew the mission (number 50 for the 325th with the Thunderbolt), which in terms of aerial combat was uneventful.

MARCH 1944

Escort duty on 3 March took the 'Checkertails' to the Rome area, where marshalling yards were the carefully selected target. Some of the busiest rail traffic in Italy ran through these yards, which were located near enough to the Eternal City for stray bombs to cause damage to priceless artefacts, so great care was taken to place ordnance exactly where it was intended. Close fighter escort helped the process, and the 325th did its best to ward off attack from some 30 Bf 109s, probably from JG 77.

Making carefully co-ordinated attacks, the German pilots were clearly no novices – a fact emphasised by the combat figures for the day. Although the Americans claimed 6-2-6 (six destroyed, two probables and six damaged) they lost four pilots. Now Lt Col Bill Chick scored his sixth, and final, kill on this mission, while future 318th FS ace, 2Lt Dick Deakins, 'bagged' a Bf 109 and an Fw 190 (in P-47D-15 42-75824).

Throughout March large-scale air battles raged over Italy, as the Germans made a last gasp attempt to stem the northward progress of the Allied armies. With the Reich constantly threatened by Allied bombing, the bulk of the *Jagdwaaffe* was pulled back to Germany, leaving JG 77 to soldier on alone. Seasoned campaigners, they would be the last to leave.

Allied targets were not hard to predict, and most vulnerable points

along the vital Axis transport system were well defended by both fighters, and flak units, operating guns of various calibres. The American escorts had few 'milk runs' during this period, and losses were inevitable. On 11 March B-17s bombed the Padua marshalling yards, and were intercepted by a mixed force of Fw 190s, Bf 109s and C 205s – the 325th duly claimed 10-4-1, but for the loss of three P-47s. One of the later was Robert Baseler's wingman, Lt Jimmy Jones, who was

mistakenly shot down by a Lt Hudson in another P-47. In a compounded case of misidentification, Jones had initially mistaken Hudson's P-47 for an Fw 190, and Hudson, thinking he was being attacked by a Focke-Wulf, had promptly shot his antagonist down.

This combat made the newly-promoted Capt Rynne an ace, his claim of two Bf 109s destroyed (and a third damaged) taking his tally to five exactly. Single Messerschmitts were also credited to Maj Green and Lts Butler, R D Clark, Barkey, Chesney, Jones and Kern, while Lt Carswell was able to enter a C 205 victory in his log book.

No further combat claims resulted from three more fighter sweeps carried out over the next two days, but on 18 March the Thunderbolts flew another escort mission to Villaorba, and all hell broke loose. George Novotny was on the mission;

'My fourth P-47 victory occurred under rather strange circumstances. Often on missions it happened that pilots suffered technical problems serious enough for them to return to base. We usually sent a second man back to cover, and on 18 March it so happened that a pilot who reported that he couldn't draw fuel from his belly tank was a tent mate of mine, and I went back with him. I saw this Bf 109, or 190, stooging around at 2 o'clock, and I wagged my wings to try and fool him, and made a 180-degree turn. I pulled right in behind him and shot him down.'

That same day, Novotny (flying P-47D-15 42-75971) received credit for a second Bf 109 damaged. In addition, single Messerschmitts were credited to Lts Clinge, Chesney, Kern, House and Barkey. For the latter pilot, this was his third of five kills, and it was achieved in P-47D-15 42-75629. Bob Barkey eventually became one of only three aces created by the 319th FS.

Another base move was made by the 'Checkertails' between 26 and 29 March, the group flying north to Lesina, where the Thunderbolts would not feel so 'crowded out' by the bombers that had increasingly dominated Foggia One. And although the new site was only 45 miles north of their previous base, and was easily reached by motor transport, the group had to postpone the move a number of times due to operational commitments – missions were flown on the 22nd, 26th and 28th, with the group's transfer finally being completed between the 26th and 29th.

The 28 March penetration support mission for heavy bombers saw the 319th FS lose its CO of just eight days, Capt William Rynne, who had 'made ace' with the 317th FS earlier in the month. Posted in to replace the tour-expired Maj 'Spor' Collins (the 319th's ranking ace with nine kills), Rynne was shot down and killed by enemy aircraft south of Venice whilst flying P-47D-19 42-75829 (he had brought this fighter with him from the 317th). Aside from Rynne, the fratricidal Lt Hudson was also lost, as was Lt A O Jones. On the credit side, future group CO, Lt Col Chet Sluder, and Lt Folkes each shot down a Bf 109.

The lion's share of the seven aerial victories scored that day fell to Lt John R Booth of the 319th FS, who shot down two Bf 109s shortly before a third Messerschmitt ran into his P-47. In clipping more than four feet off Booth's wing, the German pilot lost control of his fighter and careened into his own wingman. Both Bf 109s exploded, and Booth was subsequently pleased, and perhaps a little surprised, to receive credits for all four.



With their predominantly escort mission as part of the Fifteenth Air Force, the 'Checkertails' became the leading P-47 antagonist of the Luftwaffe in the MTO during 1944. Part of the group until its changeover to Mustangs in June 1944, Lt George Novotny had become an ace by the time he rotated home. This photo of him posing alongside his 'razorback' clearly shows the sheer size of the Thunderbolt (Novotny)



1Lt Benjamin H Emmert Jr in P-47D '47' forms up with his wingman, 2Lt Charles L Williamson, shortly after taking off from Lesina on a mission during the early spring of 1944.

Having scored a single victory (a G 55 on 25 April) and a probable (a Bf 109 on 12 April) in the Thunderbolt, Emmert shot down another five while flying the P-51, before being shot down over Hungary and captured on 1 September 1944. He remained in the air force postwar, and completed a tour with the 4th FG in Korea in 1950-51, destroying a MiG-15 and damaging a second (via McDowell)

George Novotny's P-47D-16 42-75971 *Ruthless Ruthie/Lady Janie VI* is seen parked on a typical Italian airfield hardstand, reinforced with pierced-steel planking (PSP). The aircraft is fitted with two P-38-type 165-gal drop tanks under the wings, these stores proving crucial when the group was ordered to fly long-range escort missions into Germany (Novotny)



'Herky' Green claimed his 12th kill (an Fw 190, classified at the time as an 'Fw 290') south-west of Turin on the 29th, with Lts Forrest and Butler also despatching Focke-Wulfs. The final kill for the group in March fell to a Lt Hamilton 24 hours later, when he destroyed a lone C 205.

APRIL 1944

Lt Col Chet Sluder was made CO of the 325th FG on 1 April, and three aircraft fell to the 'Clan' the following day. Sluder replaced the tour-expired Bob Baseler, who was posted to wing headquarters. Having some influence, the outgoing boss was allowed to retain his equally combat-weary P-47D-10 42-75008 *BIG STUD*. In the months to come, Baseler managed to fly a handful of missions in it, and went on to wangle a P-51B for himself when the group swapped fighters! He later became one of the few 'Checkertail Clan' pilots to fly a 'bubbletop' Thunderbolt, despite the group never being equipped with that model of P-47D.

For its 70th Thunderbolt mission on 6 April, the 325th escorted bombers to an airfield near Zagreb, in Yugoslavia. The raid was challenged by both the Luftwaffe and fighters of the pro-German Italian air arm, which had become the *Aeronautica Nazionale Repubblicana* (ANR) in September 1943. Flying Macchi C 205s and Fiat G 55s, as well as Bf 109Gs, the Italian aircraft (particularly the Bf 109Gs) proved difficult for AAF pilots to differentiate from their German counterparts in combat.

This recognition problem was compounded by the many variations in

markings worn by these aircraft. Some Italian fighters sported German national insignia and vice versa. Combat reports began to reflect this confusion, with claims also being made against Fw 190Ds, which never operated over Italy. The differences were rather academic, as the P-47 was well able to contain any of the enemy types, although the inherent aerobatic



qualities of the Italian machines (the best that Italy produced) had to be allowed for in certain situations.

George Novotny was also on the 6 April raid, scoring yet again: 'We were flying a sweep over Yugoslavia, near Trieste, when I saw this Macchi – either a C 202 or C 205; I can't say for sure – 5000 to 6000 ft above us. He was making a 180-degree turn away from us. I decided to try to get him, and dived 5000 ft to build up speed. I then pulled up, put on the water, which gave me a little kick in the backside, and fired. I kept shooting at the Italian fighter all the way up to his altitude, and was on the point of stalling when he went down. One of the other fellows confirmed the victory, and I became an ace on the P-47, with a grand total of eight.'

The aircraft type credited to George on the 6th was recorded as an C 205, whilst a Lt Oxner claimed an C 202. Individual Messerschmitts were downed by six other pilots, including the 317th FS's 1Lt Eugene H Emmons, who 'made ace' with this solitary kill following pairs on 30 January and 14 February.

Recognition confusion struck the 'Clan' a little more forcefully on 12 April, when an over-enthusiastic P-38 pilot put enough holes in Lt Harry Parker's P-47 to oblige him to bail out. The day was otherwise successful, with 2Lt Edsel Paulk, of the 317th FS, reaching ace status with his fifth, and final, victory (a Bf 109). Five other pilots also aimed well enough to claim single Bf 109s apiece whilst protecting B-24s briefed to bomb the Messerschmitt plant at Wiener Neustadt. The *Jagdwaaffe* had actually delayed their interception (by about 57 enemy fighters) until the 'heavies' were over the target itself.

Flying B-24 cover was again the order of the day 24 hours later, and this time the 'Clan' returned minus two P-47s. However, two Me 410s were destroyed, as was the first Re 2001 to figure in the claims, this being shot down by the prolific 2Lt Emmons. Rarely reported by AAF pilots, the

The five pilots posing in front of Novotny's P-47D-16 on her PSP dispersal are, from left to right, John Kerr, Pete Vitale, John M Simmons (who also flew this P-47, and scored seven kills in P-51s), J Bramer and Ira Grandel. In this view the four starboard wing machine gun breech blocks of 42-75971 are open, awaiting further attention from 317th FS armourers (via McDowell)

A close up of George Novotny, and his P-47's scoreboard and data plate. The latter, featuring both pilot and groundcrew details, was a common feature on Thunderbolts in most theatres of war (Novotny)





THE JENNY 'A' was almost certainly P-47D-15 42-75734/'78' of the 319th FS, which was flown by Lt William K Carswell. His aircraft was named after a particularly dedicated Republic factory worker who never missed a day on the production line, and put in more hours than anyone else – she was also a grandmother! Carswell, who was operations officer for the squadron, scored one victory and flew 62 missions, earning a Distinguished Flying Cross and an Air Medal, with ten Oak Leaf Clusters, in the process. Parked behind the stationary Thunderbolt at Lesina is a visiting RAF Halifax B Mk V (via *RL Ward*)

Flown by 325th FG boss, Lt Col Robert L Baseler, **BIG STUD** (P-47D-16 42-75008) was perhaps the most famous of all the 'Checkertail' Thunderbolts. Baseler led the group from 5 July 1943 until 1 April 1944, and achieved a single victory with the P-47D to add to the five he scored whilst flying the P-40F. He later acquired a 'bubbletop' P-47D after leaving the group (a sub-type never flown by the 325th in combat), which he also named **BIG STUD**

Reggiane Re 2001 Falco nevertheless equipped several units within the ANR, along with the more common Macchi and Fiat fighters.

Tragedy struck on the 16th when the 319th FS's Lt John Booth (still with four kills to his credit) was lost after ditching his P-47 in the Adriatic following a long-range escort mission to Brasov, in Romania. He was observed to be in the water apparently alive, supported by his Mae West, but no trace of him was ever found. A similar fate befell Flg

Off J W Barrett on the same sortie.

Escorting B-24s to Belgrade the following day, Eugene Emmons increased his personal score to eight with a double Bf 109 haul during separate combats over the Sofia area.

Four days prior to the Belgrade mission, George Novotny received his final credit against the Axis when he attacked an Re 2001 (in P-47D-16 42-75971) west of Budapest. His target apparently eluded the American's fire sufficiently enough for Novotny to only receive a 'damaged' claim.

The 'Clan' scored three victories on 18 April during a fighter sweep to the Udine area, but lost one pilot in return. Exactly a week later, ANR Fiat G 55s tried to engage bombers over Turin factories, but lost two of their number to escorting P-47s. There were several more Thunderbolt victories, and one pilot lost, on the intervening 14 escort missions, which otherwise yielded little action – a sure sign that the Luftwaffe was running down its units in Italy, and leaving fighter defence to the Italians.

On 5 May, four claims were made during an escort mission to Turnu Severin marshalling yards, in Romania, and eight days later 1 Lt Emmons got his ninth, and last, kill (a Bf 109 over Marina, in northern Greece), flying P-47D-15 42-75737. He would be credited with an additional Fw 190 'damaged' on 13 June, by which he had transitioned to the Mustang.

Although the enemy was now posing a much reduced threat in the air, the 'Clan' found that the weather could still be as deadly as ever on 12 May. A raid on the Bologna marshalling yards had been scheduled for this day, with planners hoping to entice remaining Axis fighters into the air in a repeat of the highly successful 30 January strike on the northern Italian airfields. However, the raid never materialised, for the 325th FG failed to





spot a single AAF bomber through the heavy cloud that blanketed the rendezvous point – and five P-47s that were seen to fly into the murk did not reappear, their pilots being declared Missing in Action.

The 97th, and last, Thunderbolt mission for the 'Checkertail Clan' was flown on 24 May, and took the form of yet another escort, this time to Wöllersdorf airfield, west of Wiener Neustadt, in Austria. Axis units reacted, and for their trouble lost six Bf 109s, two of which fell to Lt Don P Kerns. The four remaining kills were claimed by a quartet of pilots, one of whom would subsequently 'make ace' just 17 days later flying a P-51B – 1Lt Bob Barkey, of the 319th FS, had taken his tally to four in the Thunderbolt, following his success in P-47D-15 42-75629 on this final 'Clan' mission with the Republic fighter.

George Novotny returned home before the 325th changed to Mustangs in late May, although having had some P-51A time in the USA earlier in his service, he ferried a couple of the new fighters to the group prior to leaving. 'Herky' Green emerged as the 325th's top scorer on the P-47, having added ten kills to his three on P-40s – he would subsequently claim a further five with the Mustang. Both Eugene Emmons (nine) and Bill Chick (six), on the other hand, achieved their successes exclusively with the P-47. A total of six new aces had been created during the group's five months of Thunderbolt flying, the 'Checkertails' going on to become one of the few AAF groups to fly three different types of aircraft in combat. Figures showed that the top pilots all served in the 317th FS, this unit duly leading the group's scoreboard by a considerable margin.

BIG STUD might have been the most famous 325th FG P-47, but **"DALLAS BLONDE"** was undoubtedly the most colourful. The personal mount of Lt Don Kerns of the 319th FS, the fighter was named for his first wife, although the cowgirl artwork was copied from the same Vargas calendar image that formed the basis for the nose-art on 'Herky' Green's aircraft. The checkered cooling gills were an extra embellishment, whilst the final touch was provided by the sweptback blaze to the cowl ring, which had been introduced just prior to the group switching to the P-51 (via McDowell)

Although not equipped with 'bubblotop' P-47Ds, the 'Checkertail Clan' did have a couple of natural metal P-47Ds on strength, including '30'. Flown by Lt Warren F Penny of the 317th FS, it was the second Thunderbolt in the 325th to be named **Topper**. This minor mishap occurred in the spring of 1944 when the aircraft ran into soft ground on landing at the group's San Pancrazio base and became stuck. The resulting landing gear damage was easily attended to with a little muscle and sweat (via Campbell)





Maj Herschel H Green is pictured in the cockpit of his P-47D, which displays his Thunderbolt and Warhawk tallies. As the leading MTO ace, his contribution helped make the 317th FS one of the most successful AAF fighter squadrons of World War 2, with a final tally of 212 victories. When all the scores from the various fighter units were added up postwar, the 317th FS was ranked eighth overall (AAF)

Although this photo of a pair of 350th FG P-47s has previously appeared in many books, few details of the closest aircraft's fate have been quoted. *TORRID TESSIE* was downed by flak on 27 April 1945 on an armed reconnaissance mission over the Po Valley while being flown by 1Lt Homer J St Onge. The pilot belly landed the aircraft in a field west of Ghedi, in Italy, and was rescued by partisans, while *TESSIE* fell into German hands. Part of the 346th FS, the fighter also carried the second name *Philadelphia Philly* on its starboard side (USAF)

As the new Mustang era dawned on 27 May 1944, the 'Checkertails' could look back on five months of P-47 operations with considerable satisfaction, the group having come to regard the aircraft with affection for its ruggedness and high reliability. The groundcrews had also 'got on well' with the big fighter, becoming so confident with it that they carried out 'field modifications' to engine settings which improved the aircraft's power output, particularly at altitude. Just how fast the P-47 could be 'wound up to' is revealed in the following quote by a group pilot:

'If flying at 25,000 ft, to beat a Bf 109 or Fw 190 to 30,000 ft, dive to 20,000 and zoom climb. The Thunderbolt would then be waiting for the German fighters when they got there.'

FRENCH REVIVAL

Elsewhere in the Mediterranean theatre, other pilots were taking P-47s into action, some marked not with the American 'star and bar', but the tricolour roundel of France. On 1 May 1944 the first of six *Groupes de Chasse* of the revitalised *Armée de l'Air* converted to Thunderbolts. Attached to Col Archie Knight's 57th FG, which was based at Alto, on the island of Corsica, GC II/3 '*Dauphine*' flew from an adjacent airfield. Like its American counterparts, the unit was initially equipped with 'razorback' P-47Ds, GC II/3 adopting a system of markings identical to that employed by other squadrons within the Twelfth Air Force. Similar identification numbers were adopted by GC II/5 '*La Fayette*', which was declared operational as the second French Thunderbolt unit on 8 May.

Other AAF fighter groups in the Twelfth Air Force – namely the 27th, 79th, 86th, 324th and 350th FGs – all re-equipped with P-47s during 1944, the majority of these groups having previously flown P-40s. Deployed exclusively on ground attack operations during the last year of the war, they had few opportunities to engage the Axis air forces in combat, and consequently were unable to confirm any of their pilots as P-47 aces. Last, but not least, the all-negro 332nd FG 'Red Tails' (which transferred from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Air Force) operated P-47s for less than one month in April-May 1944, before receiving P-51s.

Flying their first mission on 7 June 1944, the 332nd claimed five victories on an escort mission two days later. It also received credit for the destruction of a sizeable German warship by gunfire off Trieste on the 25th of that month – just days before the first P-51s arrived at the group's Ramitelli base.



CONTINENTAL SWEEP

Thunderbolt operations in Western Europe during mid-1944 were significantly different to those in the MTO, although both air forces would have shared a 'beef' about the weather, which most-believed to be firmly on the side of the Germans! Luftwaffe activity would continue to be sporadic, with enemy fighters on both fronts making bomber kills a priority. Ground attack would still occupy numerous individual *Gruppen* however, and it was inevitable that P-47s would encounter the *Jagdwaaffe* in much the same areas of operations.

Escort for Eighth Air Force 'heavies' was gradually being placed in the hands of VIII FC groups flying the Mustang, for the Ninth more than had its hands full clearing a path through the German forces that had surrounded the Allied armies at Normandy. The urgent need at this time, therefore, was to get as many fighters as possible into bases in France in order to reduce their 'on call' time for attack missions to a minimum.

On 8 June Maj Rockford Gray became an ace after destroying three Fw 190s in a single late afternoon sortie near Cabourg, west of Sword Beach. These were victories number four, five and six for Gray, who was flying with his third operational squadron in the second of two air forces that he had served with during the war. Having scored his first air combat successes on 29 and 30 January (a half share in an Bf 110 and a full Bf 109 kill, respectively) with the Thunderbolt-equipped 369th FS/359th FG, Gray had, by that time, been a member of the Eighth Air Force for just over a year. He transferred to the Ninth Air Force, and the 365th FG, in March 1944 (he was made boss of the 388th FS in April), and after having shot down two Fw 190s, and damaged a third, over Bastogne on 2 March, Gray moved in early June to the 371st FG's HQ flight.

He would complete his tally with a damaged claim for a Bf 109 near St Lo on 24 July, flying a 'bubbletop' P-47. Maj 'Rocky' Gray was killed in a flying accident on 4 September at the 371st's Beuzeville (A-6) base.

On 22 June the boss of the 395th FS/368th FG, and future ace, Maj Paul Douglas, shot down a Bf 109 in the vicinity of St Hilare to bring him his first confirmed victory. The day's final victory/loss figures reflected the intense fighting in the air as well as on the ground. Apart from four Bf 109s destroyed by Mustangs of the 354th FG and two tactical reconnaissance squadrons,

Pilots sometimes adopted personal mascots, talismen or modes of dress as lucky charms to help see them through the rigours of combat. The 365th FG's Lt Col Louis T Houck (who had previously commanded the group's 387th FS from May 1943 through to October 1944) favoured a 'Devil's helmet', which was quite appropriate for a member of an outfit calling itself the 'Hell Hawks'. During his time with the 365th FG, Houck flew a P-47D 'bubbletop' coded 'B4-H' and named *Screamin' Weemie*.





This May 1944 photo shows the nose artwork of Col Morton Magoffin's P-47D-23 43-25682 'E4-M'/Carol Ann II. Taken at the 362nd FG's Headcorn ALG, in Kent, pre-D-Day, it shows what the colonel described as 'A Minnesota Combat Team' – his armourer Sgt Benson, himself and Sgt Johnson, his crew chief (Magoffin)

Paul Jasper of the 368th FG had a very narrow escape on 17 June 1944 when his P-47 was in collision with another Thunderbolt after his unit had been jumped by German fighters during a mission over France. Fighter collisions often resulted in the death of both pilots, but Jasper, who flew this P-47D named *DRAGON LADY*, was lucky enough to survive the impact and parachute to safety (via J Lambert)



Ninth Air Force P-47s destroyed 13 fighters for the loss of 19 Thunderbolts, the bulk of which fell to flak.

There was little appreciable change over the following days. On 23 June Paul Douglas doubled his score, the major destroying an Fw 190 near the town of Villiers – only two P-47s were lost on this day, however. The monumental task of the *Jagdwaaffe* was to hunt down the Allied *Jabos* swarming like bees over the Normandy area, but they had far too few aircraft and experienced pilots for the job. One of the principal units involved was long-serving

Channel coast *Jagdgeschwader* JG 26, whose pilots claimed a steady string of victories over Allied fighters types, but in return lost men and machines to the P-47 fighter-bombers of the 365th and 386th FGs in particular.

JULY 1944

On the morning of 5 July 1Lt Edwin 'Bill' Fisher of the 362nd FG's 377th FS was part of a group effort put up to escort B-26s briefed to hit an ammunition dump at Senonches – two-thirds of the P-47s sortied carried 500-lb bombs to add to the payload of the Marauders. Having dropped their bombs, the 377th FS was set upon by Bf 109s, and in the following combat two German fighters were shot down for the loss of two P-47s. One of the former fell to Bill Fisher for his first victory.

Later that day, the 362nd despatched all three squadrons on an armed reconnaissance to the Argentan-Chartres area, where the aircraft again used their bombs to cut railway tracks. At 2015 the 377th FS spotted 15 Fw 190s engaging P-47s from another unit near Rouen. The squadron 'waded in', and Fisher downed two without loss to the Americans.

Things did not always go the way of the P-47 pilots however, the 358th FG losing three aircraft to L/JG 26 on 12 July – Germans records only list two confirmed as shot down, with a third Thunderbolt claimed as damaged. All three fell to the guns of *Experte*, Leutnant Heinz Kemethmüller, *Kommandeur* of 4. *Staffel*. That same day eight P-47s from the 366th FS were bounced by six Fw 190s near Dreux, and two AAF fighters were shot down – the 358th recorded the loss of Lt Edward P Blevins.

By this stage in the war all P-47 fighter-bomber groups were using 12-ship formations, but with only eight aircraft carrying bombs, for it had been found to be expedient to have four fully-armed 'clean' Thunderbolts to act as top cover in the Normandy battle area. These flights had the task of taking on the Luftwaffe, and thus preventing the ground attack P-47s from having to jettison their bombs early, which 'hurt' their effectiveness.

Dive-bombing was again on the menu for the 362nd FG on the 13th, the P-47s heading for marshalling yards at Montargis, south-east of Paris. Having shot up a number of boxcars, and demolished a bridge with their bombs, the Thunderbolts were en route for home when they came upon four Fw 190s. In what must have been a satisfying 'wipe out', the now



P-47D-28 42-28633 *Margo* of the 511th FS/405th FG was typical of the many hundreds of 'anonymous' P-47Ds that served in the ETO with the Ninth Air Force. No colour markings were specified for several of the tactical Thunderbolt fighter groups, the 405th being one of them. However, squadron colours were employed, with the 507th FS using red cowling and tail bands, the 510th blue and the 511th yellow (via J V Crow)

Capt Fisher downed two fighters to attain ace status, while the remaining pair fell to group CO, Col Morton Magoffin, taking his tally to four kills.

Just 17 days later 'Mort' would become the second of just three aces created by the 362nd when he destroyed an Fw 190 near Beaumont, in Belgium, for his fifth, and last, victory.

July saw further skirmishes between JG 26 and the 358th FG, with both sides enjoying mixed results. On the 14th the Germans initially had the upper hand when a mixed force of around 50 Fw 190s and Bf 109s bounced two squadrons of 'Orange Tails' near Alençon, in France.

The *Jagdgeschwader's* tactics erred on the side of caution, with the German pilots preferring a high-speed dive out of cloud, followed by individual firing passes, and then a zoom climb back up into cloud. The countering tactics adopted by the AAF depended on whether the enemy had been spotted in time. On this occasion, Capt Coulter and Lt Childs managed to shoot down Emil Brühn (in an Fw 190A-7 from I. Gruppe) and Willi Haun (flying a Bf 109G-6 from III. Gruppe), both young Unteroffiziers being wounded when their machines crashed to earth. The Germans, in reply, downed Lt Jay 'Herky' Thomson, who was killed, and 2Lt William A Thurston, who evaded capture and eventually returned to the group – one of these P-47s was claimed by Willi Haun moments before he too was downed.

Two more fatalities were suffered by the 358th in the vicinity of Alençon that day, Lts Augustus Hamilton and John H Wheeler being the third and fourth group P-47s to fall to the guns of JG 26. A further two Thunderbolts were also claimed by the *Geschwader*, but 358th FG records do not confirm these final claims.

Unseasonably bad weather in late July hampered air operations over what the Germans had termed the 'Invasion Front' – it was as good a description as any for the time being, but Allied commanders wanted their great *Overlord* expedition to put any coastal connotation

Full details of the P-47s flown by a number of the Ninth Air Force's fighter aces remain obscure, among them being the mount of Capt Edwin O Fisher of the 377th FS/362nd FG. This photo shows the forward part of his P-47D-27 (42-26919), complete with its nickname, which was painted in red, shadowed in black – its squadron code was 'E4-E'. Fisher, who can be seen seated in the cockpit, was the 377th FS's sole wartime ace, scoring six confirmed victories and two damaged. Note also the numerous other mission markings painted on his fighter. This shot was almost certainly taken at Rennes (A-27) in late August 1944





Extra special nose-art survived variations in squadron marking styles in some Thunderbolt squadrons, as this aircraft shows. Part of the 368th FG during the period when markings were a little less flamboyant than they were near the end of the war, few other details about this aircraft are known – although an impressive number of bombing missions and fighter sweeps are recorded on its fuselage ‘log’ (via Campbell)

behind them as soon as possible. An early breakout was vital to success.

AUGUST 1944

The month of August saw the invasion proceeding well in the US sector, commanded by Omar Bradley, when a breakout was successfully made at St Lo. Progress in the British sector remained slow, however, with Montgomery's force stalled in front of Caen. Heavy bombers would ultimately devastate this town before it was liberated.

Allied air support did not slacken, and neither did the strong

German reaction to it. Bill Fisher of the 362nd took his final score to seven on 9 August with two Bf 109s destroyed, this day proving to be one of the group's most successful to date. Flying three missions in support of the 79th Division in the Le Mans area, the 362nd destroyed a Bf 109 on the first one – and the 379th FS was congratulated by ground troops for their skilful destruction of enemy vehicles. On its last mission of the day, the 378th FS was bounced by a dozen Bf 109s, but emerged from the fray with seven claimed for no loss. Bill Fisher was part of the top cover for the 377th FS, which was jumped by 30 bandits after bombing, but again the Americans came home with all aircraft accounted for. Two Bf 109s were destroyed by Fisher, who was flying one of the new P-47D-27s recently issued to the group in order to maintain its full complement of aircraft.

Most Ninth Air Force groups continued to fly ‘razorback’ P-47s (D-11s, -15s, -22s and -23s), with the new replacement ‘bubbletops’ being issued as required. The final production models of the early-configuration P-47 were the D-22 and -23, both of which had new propellers – the former a Hamilton Standard unit and the latter a Curtiss Electric. Both boasted ‘paddle’ blades, which made more effective use of engine output.

A counter to the previously successful day came for the 362nd FG on the 10th, when flak claimed ‘Mac’ Magoffin near Falaise. Wounded after bailing out of stricken P-47D-25 42-26554 – he was observed by other pilots to be lying still on the ground – he was captured by the Germans and moved to a Paris hospital. Having sustained severe leg injuries, ‘Mac’ was left behind when the city was abandoned by the retreating enemy.

20 August turned out to be a memorable day for 1Lt Joe Matte, who had transferred to the 362nd FG in February and joined the 378th FS. Little air action had come his way until this day, when he was part of two flights sent out by the squadron on an armed reconnaissance of the front-line. Matte's encounter report told the story of the ensuing action:

‘I was flying “Firebrick Yellow” leader, which was acting as cover for Red Flight. We were vectored to Etampes, and then north to Paris. Red Flight shot up two trucks on the way at 1545. I was at 5000 ft covering Red Flight at 2000 ft. I saw 12 planes at 9000 ft going down slowly, so I started to climb. Red Three called eight of them in to Red Leader. Evidently, the planes, which were Me 109s, did not see me as I climbed above

them, because every one of them was going after Red Flight.

'I tried to warn Red Leader but some controller cut me out on the R/T. Red Leader saw them in time to start turning to the left. The (German) leader and his wingman wasted no time in getting on Red One and Two, so I went down to break this attack up. The two Huns saw me and climbed in a left turn, with me in perfect position to shoot. As I fired at 200 yards, the No 2 Hun went inside the turn of his leader. Every round seemed to hit him as he flipped to the right, directly into his leader. Two explosions resulted, and sent two Huns to earth. No one bailed out.'

Matte climbed again and found four Messerschmitts firing on a P-47. He promptly dived on the German *Schwarm*:

'The numbers two and three men broke to the right, the leader pulling up to the left in a steep climb. He did a roll and ended up in my gunsight, about 200 yards away. Just a short burst blew him to pieces. I flew through the debris and picked up a little blood on my canopy.

'I looked to my left and saw an Me 109 coming straight in on me. I pulled around straight into him, but didn't have time to shoot – so I started turning to the left with him. In three turns I was almost in position to shoot, so I fired a short burst behind him. This seemed to make him loosen up his turn, so I easily pulled a deflection shot on him and let him have another short burst at 300 yards, which cut off part of his left wing. He flipped over on his back and bailed out immediately.'

The day was not over for Joe Matte and Yellow Section. No sooner had this combat ended when a Bf 109 came at him, but not firing. Matte was in the act of chasing it when he spotted 20+ Fw 190s diving from about 10,000 ft. All through the dogfight his wingman had stayed with him, but as he continued to close with the Bf 109, Matte lost sight of him. He had told him to wait until he gave the signal to break:

'I looked too long for him, thus allowing the Fw 190s to catch me. When I hit 1000 ft, two Fw 190s were firing – one each from the left and



Slick Chick was later embellished with extra framing for her portrait when the cowlings of most P-47Ds within the 368th FG had an elongated blaze design applied. This particular machine was almost certainly on the strength of the 397th FS, which used blue as a squadron colour. It seems likely that this Thunderbolt had been passed to another pilot since the photo seen on the opposite page was taken, for its previous combat record has been cleaned off (via Campbell)

Down in the rough, probably after taking hits from the Thunderbolt's deadliest foe – German flak. This P-47D-26 of the 10th FS/50th FG has had its radio hatch access cover removed from immediately below the cockpit (numerous engine cowlings panels are also missing). This hatch often carried pilot and groundcrew details, and it was a simple enough task to screw it onto a replacement P-47 issued to a pilot who, for one reason or another, needed a new aircraft (via J V Crow)





The rarely-illustrated group markings of the 48th FG are seen on *Ma Cherie*, which was flown by Victor N Cabas. The nose checkers were white and red in colour, but understandably perhaps, groundcrews seem to have shied away from such a labour-intensive scheme, and many of the group's P-47s ended the war in a very plain finish, devoid of any colour markings at all (J V Crow)

A relatively rare modification for 'razorback' P-47Ds was the fitment of the RAF-derived Malcolm hood. Highly sought after by US pilots, for it helped eliminate the aft blind spots prevalent with the original framed 'greenhouse' canopy, the hood was always in short supply – so the Americans contrived to fit B-24-type clear 'bubble' window sections into the side panels of the canopy. Few such conversions were made, but the pilot of this 10th FS/50th FG machine appears well satisfied with his groundcrews' efforts (via J V Crow)



right. The one on the right hit me in the accessory section, whilst the one on the left hit me in the left wing and tail. They both swept under me at the same time, and I can't see how they got past me. The third ship that fired on me shot above, but hit the prop and came above me, breaking to the left and up. I turned to the right and down, and as I made a 180-degree turn, I saw two large explosions on the ground, but I can't claim (these) to be the two 190s because I didn't have time to look.'

Shooting down four enemy aircraft on one mission was an impressive 'first', for even a single kill representing an aerial victory painted on the side of a tactical P-47 was a matter of considerable pride. It reflected the hard work of the groundcrews, as well as the pilot's skill, particularly as destroying the Luftwaffe was never the primary duty of the Ninth Air Force groups. Joe Matte would eventually 'make ace' on 8 November.

Destroying the enemy could at times seem almost less daunting than beating the AAF system for awarding confirmed kills, as 20-year-old Texan, 2Lt John Wainwright of the 508th FS/404th FG, was to find out.

A routine 29 July mission for the 508th FS, then based at Chapelle, in France, was a prelude to one of the oddest rewards for shooting prowess made to a wartime P-47 pilot – an accolade which amounted to little more than that of 'non-ace'! But no hint of the strange event to come clouded John Wainwright's mind that July morning.

Flying 'razorback' P-47D-22 42-25693 in the Savray area, he encountered Fw 190s, and in a brief exchange of gunfire, observed damage to two of the German aircraft. The only pilot in the 508th to claim anything that day, Wainwright duly received credit for two fighters damaged. It wasn't much, but as it was the first close contact he had had with the Luftwaffe in the air, it represented a milestone for him. More was to come...

SEPTEMBER 1944

By September 1944 the Allies had pushed across the Seine, and forced the German army into headlong retreat. Major French towns and ports were liberated, but no German territory had yet been taken. With the main thrust of the Allied armies being across central France, Germany forces occupying the area south of the Loire were largely left to the mercy of Allied fighter-bombers.

On 1 September the 36th FG won a Distinguished Unit Citation (DUC) for its work under XIX TAC, along with high praise from Gen

Patton – not a man given to heaping accolades on anyone outside his own Third Army. In order to protect his exposed right flank on the right side of the Loire, Patton requested that Maj Gen Otto P Weyland's P-47 groups within XIX TAC remove the threat posed by German units crossing the Loire. Nine squadrons of fighter-bombers responded magnificently by firstly trapping the enemy columns, and then systematically annihilating them to the point where the enemy

offered to surrender, provided that the 'hell from the heavens' stopped. Patton accepted.

The slaughter and destruction had been truly appalling – the 36th FG alone had accounted for 600 vehicles in a single day of hectic action. The surrender document, signed in Tours, was one of the few instances in World War 2 when aircraft had brought about a decisive battlefield result without the involvement of ground troops. Patton sent cases of Cointreau to the 36th, enough for every pilot.

The loss of a popular commander was always a hard fact of operational life, and one that was brought home to the 358th FG on 13 September. The 'Orange Tails' were flying a support mission for the Third Army near Metz when flak hit the P-47D flown by Col Cecil Wells. This was a doubly sad event because Wells managed to bail out, his chute opened and within minutes a nearby Allied medical unit which had seen the Thunderbolt come down was on the scene. However, upon their arrival they found the colonel dead. He had apparently struck the tailplane of his aircraft as he jumped – a far from uncommon hazard. Col James B Tipton took over command of the 358th on 20 September.

On 17 September Montgomery launched his bold plan to 'bounce' the Rhine at Arnhem, and push into the Ruhr valley. When Operation *Market Garden* began to go wrong, Allied airpower was called in in an attempt to break the deadlock created by strong enemy resistance. Assets from both the Eighth and Ninth Air Forces participated in flak suppression and ground attack sorties, and the period was marked by substantial losses of P-47s, mainly to ground fire – for some units their worst of the war.

— AN ACE 54 YEARS ON! —

On 28 September, the 404th FG had taken off from Juvincourt (A-68), which it had occupied earlier that month, and headed for the Arnhem area. A number of Bf 109s and Fw 190s made a diving pass on the 507th and 508th FSs, the German pilots appearing not to wish to dogfight the Americans. However, combat was joined long enough to enable 1Lt Richard Arnold (507th) to down an Fw 190, which was confirmed as destroyed – two other pilots were credited with having damaged a Focke-Wulf apiece. When the 508th FS landed, one pilot, 2Lt John Wainwright, was missing. Two hours passed, then another 30 minutes, before the wayward P-47 finally appeared in the circuit.

Wainwright had been detained over Holland by the Messerschmitts that had briefly attacked the group, and flying as 'Tail-end Charlie' in his element, he had pursued three Bf 109s attempting to bounce his colleagues. The following description of what happened next comes from the all-important General Order No 4, approved by Gen Carl Spaatz at the time of the awarding of a DSC to Wainwright on 8 January 1945:

'While participating in a fighter sweep over enemy territory, the formation in which Wainwright was flying was (continued on page 60)



Hangar roof view of a fully-marked P-47D 'bubbletop' of the 492nd FS/48th FG, taken during August 1944 when the group was based at Deux Jumeaux. With the individual code F4-Z (serial unknown), this aircraft not only has a red and white checkered cowling, but a red nose band and rudder as well (via H S Moseley)



1

P-47D (sub-type and serial unknown) '11' of Capt Herschel H Green, 317th FS/325th FG, Celone, Italy, early 1944



2

P-47D-16 42-75737/'25' *HUN HUNTER* of 1Lt Eugene Emmons, 317th FS/325th FG, Lesina, Italy, May 1944



3

P-47D-16 42-76021/'10' *Rocky* of Maj Lewis W Chick, CO of the 317th FS/325th FG, Celone, Italy, January 1944



4

P-47D-16 42-75971/'27' *Ruthless Ruthie/Lady Janie VI* of 1Lt George P Novotny, 317th FS/325th FG, Lesina, Italy, April 1944



5

P-47D-23 42-75008/'88' *BIG STUD* of Lt Col Robert L Baseler, CO of the 325th FG, Lesina, Italy, April 1944



6

P-47D (sub-type and serial unknown) '33' *Little Sir Echo* of 2Lt Edsel Paulk, 317th FS/325th FG, Lesina, Italy, May 1944



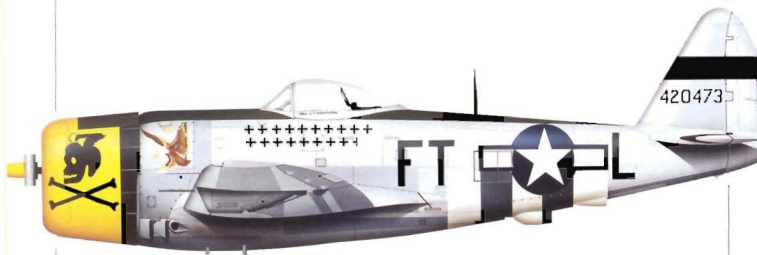
7

P-47D-16 42-75971/'27' *Ruthless Ruthie/Lady Janie VI* of 2Lt John M Simmons, 317th FS/325th FG, Lesina, Italy, April 1944



8

P-47D-23 42-27682/'E4-M' *CAROL ANN II* of Col Morton Magoffin, CO of the 362nd FG, Rennes (A-27), France, August 1944



9

P-47D-30 44-20473/'FT-L' of Maj Glenn Eagleston, CO of the 353rd FS/354th FG, Rosieres-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944



10

P-47D-28 42-29336/'FT-O' of Capt Kenneth H Dahlberg, 353rd FS/354th FG, Rosieres-en-Haye (A-98), France, February 1945



11

P-47D-28 42-28473/'R3-F' *Dorothy K* of 1Lt Talmadge Ambrose, 410th FS/373rd FG, Lippstadt (Y-98), Germany, April 1945



12

P-47D-30 44-20545/'B2-M' *La Mort* of 1Lt Melvyn R Paisley, 390th FS/366th FG, Handorf (Y-94), Germany, May 1945



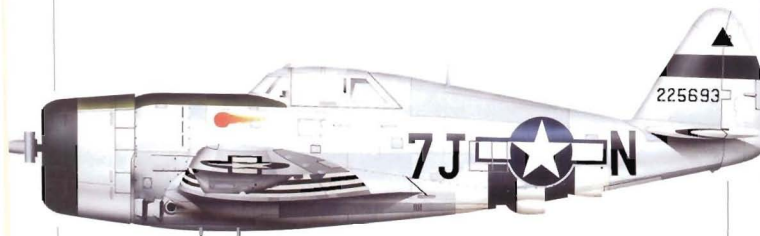
13

P-47D-25 42-26407/'C4-Y' COFFEY'S POT of Lt Col Robert Coffey, 365th FG, Azeville (A-7), France, July 1944



14

P-47D-28 44-20272/'FT-Z' of 1Lt Lloyd Overfield, 353rd FS/ 354th FG, Rosieres-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944



15

P-47D-22 42-25693/'7J-N' of 2Lt John W Wainwright, 508th FS/404th FG, Juvincourt (A-68), France, September 1944



16

P-47D-27 42-27275/'17-B' *"The King"* of Lt Col Royal N Baker, 48th FG, St Trond (A-92), Belgium, spring 1945



17

P-47D-30 44-21071/'H5-W' *JUST BESS* of Lt Arnold L Abel, 392nd FS/ 367th FG, Eschborn (Y-74), Germany, May 1945



18

P-47D-30 44-20514/'GQ-U' *Wee Speck* of Capt Lowell K Brueland, 355th FS/354th FG, Rosieres-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944



19

P-47D-28 42-28750/'GQ-I' *LIVE BAIT* of Capt Clayton K Gross, 355th FS/354th FG, Rosieres-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944



20

P-47D-30 44-33214/'CP-R' *OLE TRAPPER IV* of Lt Robert E Ward, 367th FS/358th FG, Toul, France, March 1945



21

P-47D-30 44-33418/'CH-Y' *Stinky* of Lt Don Volkmer, 365th FS/358th FG, Sandhofen (Y-79), Germany, May 1945



22

P-47D-30 44-33287/'B8-A' *FIVE BY FIVE* of Col Joseph Laughlin, CO of the 362nd FG, Furth (R-28), Germany, April 1945



23

P-47D-30 44-33287/'B8-A' *FIVE BY FIVE* of Col Joseph Laughlin, CO of the 362nd FG, Straubing (R-68), Germany, May 1945



24

P-47D-30 44-33454/'1A-P' of 1Lt Donald O Scherer, 366th FS/358th FG, Sandhofen (Y-79), Germany, April 1945



25

P-47D-28 44-19698/'32', pilot unknown, GC II/5 'La Fayette' Armée de l'Air, Amberieu, France, circa autumn 1944



26

P-47D-20 42-76464/'A8-O' Peg O'My Heart of Lt Floyd N Hass, 391st FS/366th FG, Asch (Y-29), Belgium, January 1945



27

P-47D-22 42-25742/'22-D' Kansas Tornado II of Capt Howard J Curran, 510th FS/405th FG, St Dizier (A-64), France, September 1944



28

P-47D-27 42-27309/'39' *OLE BALDY* of Lt John P Botten, 525th FS/86th FG, Brauschardt, Germany, April 1945



29

P-47D-28 42-28641/'A7-W' *SLEEPY JEAN* the 3rd, pilot unknown, 395th FS/368th FG, St Dizier (A-64), France, circa May 1945



30

P-47D-27 42-26919/'E4-E' *Shirley Jane III* of Capt Edwin O Fisher, 377th FS/362nd FG, Lignerolles (A-12), France, August 1944

attacked by a superior force of enemy fighters. Without support, and completely disregarding the heavy odds against him, he attacked three enemy fighters that were making a determined attack on his flight leader, and destroyed one of them. Thrown into a spin by the explosion of the enemy fighter, he regained control of his plane and brought down three more enemy aircraft. By this time completely separated from his formation, he encountered two more enemy planes, outmanoeuvred them, and as he was getting into position to fire, the enemy aircraft collided and were destroyed.'

Throughout this action Wainwright had been unable to call for assistance from his colleagues due to a faulty radio (in P-47D-27 42-27185). When the results of his 20-minute combat over Holland had been analysed, the Texan's claim for six Bf 109s destroyed was not only allowed, but brought a recommendation for an immediate DSC from none other than Maj Gen Hoyt S Vandenberg, Ninth Air Force commanding general. Despite receiving the United States' second highest award for valour, John Wainwright never received official confirmation for his six kills due to the fact that no copy of the crucial General Order No 4 could be located in any government archive! Therefore, for 54 years his record showed that he had been awarded six 'unconfirmed destroyed'.

Having survived the war, now Capt Wainwright was tragically killed in a take-off accident in a 404th FG P-47 at the group's final ETO base at Stuttgart/Echterdingen (R-50) on 5 July 1945. His war record remained unchanged until 13 October 1998, when the USAF's chief of the Research Division at Maxwell AFB, in Alabama, agreed to amend the records following the discovery of a copy of General Order No 4 in 'dusty' files held by Capt Andrew Wilson, who had compiled the 404th FG's history in 1945! This document is now securely in the hands of the USAF. Aside from belatedly being one of the few American pilots who became an 'ace in a day', Capt John Wainwright was also the 404th FG's sole ace.

OCTOBER 1944

With autumn weather not yet disrupting Allied air operations to a significant degree, it nevertheless looked very doubtful that the advance into Germany could be speeded up before the onset of winter – the war was definitely not going to be 'over by Christmas' as some had hoped. With the Allies established along the 'Siegfried Line', heavy rain, which spread right across the continent, and also affected the Italian front, reduced movement. Much hard fighting lay ahead in Italy, but the Allies postponed anything major in that theatre until the spring of 1945. A similar slowdown appeared to be imminent on the Western Front.

A significant event occurred on 2 October when elements of the 388th FS/365th FG were on patrol southwest of Münster shortly before 1530. Pilots observed four enemy aircraft and gave chase, and Capt Valmore J Beaudrault was alerted to the fact that these were no 'ordinary' Bf 109s or Fw 190s when his number three, Lt Robert Teeter, shouted, 'My God, what was that?' when one of them suddenly climbed as the P-47s attempted a bounce. They had encountered their first Me 262s.

Beaudrault and his wingman tried to pursue the jet, and were frustrated when it turned to attack them on several occasions. Just as they were about to give up the chase, the Me 262A-2a ran out of fuel, and its pilot,

Oberfeldwebel Hieronymous Lauer of 3./KG 51, had no choice but to put it down. The aircraft cartwheeled and exploded when it hit the ground, and Lauer was badly injured. Upon returning to base, Capt Beaudrault lodged the first claim for a jet shot down by a pilot of the Ninth. Unsurprisingly, he was only awarded an 'unconfirmed destroyed'!

For the unfortunate Lauer, this was the second time he had fallen victim to AAF P-47s, for on 28 August he had crash-landed following an encounter with 78th FG Thunderbolts near the Belgian town of Termond. On this occasion, 82nd FS CO, Maj Joseph Myers (4.5 kills), was credited with sharing the 'victory' with his No 4, Lt Manford O Croy, although it appears that Lauer had already struck the ground *before* being hit by the machine gun fire. Nonetheless, the aircraft was officially recorded as having been the first Me 262 claimed by any Allied fighter.

The 388th FS proved to be singularly unlucky in obtaining sure kills over the Me 262, for including the incident cited above, various pilots filed a total of 17 'destroyed' claims up to the end of the war, with only two being confirmed as definite victories! This ratio probably says as much about the disparity of performance between turbojet and reciprocating engined fighters, as it does about the reliability of US combat reports – there was no policy, at least in the Ninth, of crediting pilots with anything other than 100 per cent confirmed kills.

Encounters with enemy aircraft continued to be frequent as the US tactical air forces systematically pushed the Germans into an ever-smaller defensive ring. Sandwiched between the Allies in the west and the advancing Red armies to the east, the enemy's position was growing increasingly desperate with every day that passed. But there was a perceptible slowing down of the Allied advance: airpower, despite dominating the battlefields from Holland to central Italy, could do only so much. Troops had to secure territory in order to bring about the final surrender of all German forces.

Lt Col Paul Douglas, CO of the 368th FG's 396th FS, was flying near Koblenz on 20 October when he was engaged in a dogfight with Fw 190s. When the unit disengaged from combat, Douglas had downed two Focke-Wulfs, claimed a third as an unconfirmed destroyed, and damaged a fourth. This left him just one victory short of becoming the 368th's only official ace.

During the month the 36th FG received its first 'bubbletop' P-47Ds as replacements for its long-serving 'razorbacks'. Issue of the later Thunderbolt models to Ninth Air Force groups (and the handful of French units) followed a fairly random pattern, there being generally few complaints about early models, apart from considerable wear and tear imposed on individual machines. There had, however, been 'grumblings' from some units when they received worn out machines passed on from VIII FC following the re-



Another of the Ninth's aces whose aircraft details have remained incomplete is Lt Col Paul P Douglas of the 396th FS/368th FG. He flew a variety of P-47Cs and Ds, several of which were named *Arkansas Traveller* – frustratingly, no serials for these aircraft have yet come to light. Douglas was finally credited with seven kills, which are known to have appeared under the cockpit of *Arkansas Traveller* in the form of swastikas in red or black circles (via Lambert)

Rough and Ready was the P-47D-28 named by 1Lt William J 'Wildman' Garry, who was one of a handful of 'near' aces who flew with the 368th FG. A member of the 'aceless' 395th FS, Garry was credited with four confirmed kills and a further two unconfirmed. He is believed to be the pilot seen posing here with the aircraft, which features the unit's late-war yellow nose blaze design (via Campbell)



Testing the strength of a PSP taxiway, bombed-up P-47Ds of the 365th FG roll gingerly out to their active runway 'somewhere in France' in the late summer of 1944. It made sense to take it easy in the early stages of a mission, for a ground accident could delay take-off, damage aircraft and, in all probability, tear up the runway surface. Pilots had little forward vision over the P-47's long nose, and standard procedure in many units was to have a man sitting on the wing of every other aircraft as the squadrons moved out along the taxi strip. Pilots would also vigorously swing their aircraft from side to side by 'fishtailing' the rudder to improve forward visibility (USAF)

equipment of its groups with the P-51. Anything useable was patched up and pressed into service, but such a situation did nothing to relieve the feeling that the Ninth was something of a 'country cousin' when compared with the well-supplied Eighth Air Force.

New aircraft improved unit effectiveness as less maintenance time was necessary, and long suffering crew chiefs, and their specialist teams, could enjoy some respite from working technical miracles. 'Keepin' 'em in the air' never became impossible, but it was often challenging, as the inevitable combat losses caused gaps in unit inventories. Repairs as a result of enemy action had to be attended to quickly, and any skimping on such work was, by its very nature, counter-productive.

The tactical situation in the ETO allowed very little room for the front-line P-47 groups to have many 'hangar queens'. Not that there were often hangars to start with, for one of the major problems facing the ground-crews was the lack of cover – of any kind, in some instances – at certain airfields. If the buildings had not been ruined by Allied air attack, the retreating Germans had often blown them up, and until repairs could be put in hand, servicing had to be carried out in the open. In winter this became a miserable and difficult task, but one that had to be done. To their credit, the servicing teams never let the pilots down, despite having to feed and secure cumbersome belts of bullets into ammunition bays, refuel fighters from bowzers with temperamental pumps, and cut and rivet airframe patches – all in rain, wind and snow.

Even though the 365th FG had had some difficulty in confirming Me 262s destroyed, conventionally-powered Luftwaffe fighters nevertheless continued to fall before the group's guns. On 21 October two Fw 190s were shot down near Monthaur by Maj Jim Hill, CO of the 388th FS. En route to becoming one of only two official aces within the 365th FS, Hill would later down three Bf 109s on 18 April 1945 to bring his tally to five.

On 28 October the 404th FG ran into a formation of Fw 190s and decimated them to the tune of six confirmed destroyed. The air battle did not make anyone an ace at the time, although as previously mentioned, that honour very belatedly went to the 508th FS's John Wainwright with six destroyed – his recently promoted boss, Maj George McLaughlin, also received credit for two kills. The latter were claimed as 'Fw 190Ds', but this would seem to be very unlikely, as the much-vaunted 'long noses' had only been issued to III./JG 54 at this point in the war, and as no *Grünherz* aircraft were lost to AAF P-47s on that day, it appears that those fighters involved in this particular combat were standard radial-engined Fw 190s.



Incidentally, George McLaughlin got through a substantial number of P-47s during his service with the group – seven, to be precise!

Weather conditions were now dictating the scope of Allied tactical sorties, the ground war being divided into a series of rough fights to secure towns, and particularly ports. Numerous German garrisons had to be directly assaulted in order to clear them, which took time, thus making overall progress slower than anticipated. Tactical airpower maintained the pressure whenever targets were clearly identified, however.

With the formation of the 1st Tactical Air Force (TACAF) on 6 November 1944, French and American flyers began fighting under the same command for the first time. Flying in direct support of the US Sixth Army, 1st TACAF was commanded by US Maj Gen Robert H Webster, with Brig Gen Paul Goradot heading the 1st French Air Corps, which had originally been raised in Corsica.

The 1st TACAF was something of an ad hoc force created 'in the field' and organised on American lines, but lacking a standard chain of command. There simply was not time to go about things 'by the book', for the front was otherwise in danger of being denuded of air support at a critical time. By transferring in US fighter and bomber groups, and declaring French-manned units operational, 1st TACAF did much to prevent the Germans from exploiting a weak Allied southern front.

As P-47 tactical missions piled up, the familiar American-style bomb logs appeared on aircraft flown by the French pilots, many of whom had escaped to North Africa to join units based there before their country was liberated. Along with the logs representing the predominantly ground attack sorties flown with 1st French Air Corps, individual pilots marked their Thunderbolts with the aerial kills they had scored earlier in the war.

With numerous ex-Free French air force personnel already stationed in England, the forward-based 1st TACAF P-47 units received supplies from the UK courtesy of the US Air Technical Service Command, and flown over by French crews. C-47s transferred to the French were used in the main to ferry freight to the combat units, which saved valuable time, and doubtless resulted in some pleasing reunions.

Action for the French pilots brought the inevitable casualties from German flak, with some 17 P-47s being lost between 1 September 1944 and 15 January 1945. The limited opportunity for French pilots to score victories while flying the P-47 can be readily appreciated, but the occasional air combat nevertheless did bring success. For example, on 31 March 1945, *Capitaine de l'Espinay* downed an Fw 190D-9 north of Karlsruhe.

NOVEMBER 1944

As the weather further deteriorated, US Third Army began another drive to take Metz, commencing on 8 November. Close to the German border, the city finally fell on the 22nd, by which time the whole front had erupted into renewed action. Securing the area gave the 365th FG a new forward base from which to operate, and the group prepared to move.

The First French Army had seized Belfort the previous day, with probing columns having reached as far as the Swiss border, while among the US Seventh Army's gains was the city of Strasbourg, which was freed on the 24th. Progress towards the Waal and Rhine rivers remained slow, however, with Allied pilots noting increased Luftwaffe activity as the



A considerable number of Ninth Air Force pilots flew P-47Ds with victory flags painted on their aircraft, often without any visible distinction being made between air and ground kills. Although many victories came into the 'ground' category, individual pilots who shot down one or more enemy aircraft naturally included these victories within their overall score. Pilots who did qualify their kills included 2Lt Eugene Martin of the 379th FS/362nd FG, seen here posing with his P-47D – note that his single aerial kill is prefixed by the letter 'A', whilst his two ground kills are marked with a 'G' (via J V Crow)

Close up of the elaborate badge on the yellow cowling of Gene Martin's 379th FS P-47D. Most such designs, if they were not entirely personal in nature, were generated at squadron and/or group level, and occasionally given an official stamp to be perpetuated in postwar unit badges. It is not known if any such longevity stemmed from this design, as the 379th FS did not have an officially approved wartime squadron badge – it does, however, look 'classy' enough to have filled the mantle! (via J V Crow)



remaining German forces were marshalled for one final counter-offensive.

1Lt Joe Matte of the 362nd FG's 378th FS became the group's third, and final, ace when, on 8 November, he encountered a large formation of Fw 190s whilst leading his unit (as 'Firebrick Red Leader') on an armed reconnaissance. Having bombed and strafed enemy installations east of Saarbrücken, the P-47s of Red, Yellow, Green and Blue Flights were en route home when 'Yellow Three' called in 'bogies' as he sighted 40+ Fw 190s boring in on

the American formation from astern. To add to the adrenaline flow, both light and heavy flak now began to erupt within the formation as the opposing fighters closed on each other.

Matte dived into the fracas and latched onto an Fw 190 that was firing at a second P-47. All three fighters headed straight for cloud, with the Fw 190 just entering the overcast as Matte's bullets 'sparkled' all over it. He ceased firing as the cloud enveloped his own aircraft:

'I climbed back through the middle of one of the largest fights anyone could imagine. Fw 190s were shooting wildly, whilst others were spinning, tumbling, diving and climbing, and still others were shooting at P-47s, and P-47s in turn shooting at them. I have no words to (properly) describe it.'

'Little Joe' found another Focke-Wulf in his sights, and gave it a short burst from 300 yards. The enemy aircraft did not appear to be badly damaged, but as Matte shot by it, he saw the pilot bail out. He then chased Fw 190s all over the sky from 8000 ft down to the 'deck', out-maneuvring several that got too interested in him. Then:

'I came across one 190 doing a roll just under the top layer of clouds, so I dropped down on him. He broke to the right, and just as I prepared to fire, he reversed his turn and started to climb. I fired a good burst at 300 yards, 40 degrees (deflection), observing several good hits. His plane fell off to the left in a spin, so I started climbing to the left and watched his plane as it spun into the ground.'

Low on fuel, all 'Firebrick' aircraft were advised to break off the fight and return to base. Matte picked up 'Red Four', and the two P-47s landed at Rouvres (A-82). The new ace was credited with one Fw 190, confirmed by the eye-witness report of Lt Charles Stewart ('Red Three'), but his remaining two 'kills' from this sortie were only rated as 'unconfirmed destroyed'. In an air battle reckoned to be one of the toughest ever experienced by the group, the 362nd had claimed 11 fighters downed.

Proof that the Luftwaffe was still capable of offering Allied airmen a substantial challenge with conventional fighters was graphically illustrated on 25 November. That day, Maj Robert D Johnston, CO of the 50th FG's 81st FS, was leading his flight on an escort mission, covering French 1st TACAF B-26s sent to bomb an enemy tank and troop con-

centrations near Landau. As the Marauders closed on the target at 1550, around 60 German fighters were spotted approaching them.

Johnston and his pilots needed no second glance to calculate the odds – seven to one at least. Undaunted, the major tore into the Bf 109s with all guns blazing, and minutes later he emerged, quite amazingly, having downed three of the enemy. This left him just one victory short of becoming an ace. More importantly, Johnston's actions had prevented any damage being inflicted on the B-26s, which hit their targets, and helped repel a German counter-attack building northeast of Sarrebourg, in France.

The following day one of the last groups to receive P-47s within the Ninth Air Force performed its first mission with the fighter. Known as the 'Pioneer Mustang Group', the 354th was far from being an inexperienced combat unit fresh from training in the 'States. As the nickname suggests, its three units had been heavily involved with the P-51B in the ETO from December 1943, producing almost 50 aces in less than 12 months.

This late change of equipment for the 354th came about in response to the AAF's decision to group virtually all ETO P-51s within VIII FC, and allow the Ninth to operate most of the P-47s in-theatre – the 354th begrudgingly converted to P-47Ds in early November. The 356th FS flew the group's first mission with the Thunderbolt on 26 November, the 355th FS following suit on 5 December and the 353rd ten days later. To most pilots' relief, the 354th shifted back to P-51Ds in February 1945.

Elsewhere, on 26 November the 366th FG moved into Asch (Y-29), in Belgium, the 'new' airfield having a 'temporary' air about it thanks to its PSP runways and tents. But it was nearer to the frontline, being about 30 miles from the Hurtgen Forest and 45 from the Ardennes. Despite the conditions, and the cold, pilots and groundcrews settled in as far as was possible so that the group could continue flying missions without delay.

Proceedings at Asch were enlivened by the odd passing V1, and the 390th FS's 2Lt Mel Paisley remembered enough of the 'scuttlebutt' about tipping the robot bombs over with a fighter's wingtip to attempt to undertake such a feat. He duly found one of the bombs and put his theory to the test, sliding the wing of his Thunderbolt under the V1, before throwing the control stick over. Up went the wing and down went the bomb. Paisley then decided to obtain evidence of his kill with the aircraft's gun camera, and he gave the dark shape a passing 'squirt' of gunfire. He immediately wished he hadn't, for the V1 exploded – whether as a result of the 0.50-cal 'slugs' impacting it, or the flying bomb's proximity to the ground, Paisley never determined. As he flew straight through the shock wave, his P-47 was showered in mud and debris.

Back at Asch, people mercilessly probed Paisley's sanity, refusing to believe that anyone would fall for such a story about V1s, and their sensitive gyros. It was the last flying bomb Mel Paisley saw – but he had recalled the stories correctly. Fighters did indeed topple V1s by disturbing the airflow over their wings and upsetting their gyros.

Asch would hardly be a rest cure for the 366th, for Luftwaffe activity was increasing as preparations for the last major Wehrmacht offensive on the Western Front began – undetected by Allied reconnaissance flights, which were hampered by days of bad weather over the Ardennes region. Spread thin across the entire Western Front, the ground troops dug in. A winter stalemate seemed inevitable.

ARDENNES SURPRISE

Low key aerial and ground activity during the first week of December 1944 did not mean that offensive operations in the west had been completely suspended. Escorting Ninth Air Force medium bombers was now regular duty for the fighter-bomber groups, and they relished the chance for renewed combat with the *Jagdwaffe*. Such action came the way of the 405th FG on 12 December.

On the second of the day's missions for the 509th FS, Red and White Flights had just completed an attack on rail targets in the Kaiserlautern area when Blue Flight called in 'bandits'. Around 20 Fw 190s and Bf 109s had initially exploited a height advantage over the 405th's P-47s to quickly down four aircraft, but the prompt reaction by other Thunderbolt pilots resulted in claims of seven German fighters destroyed.

In a day that saw an unusually high degree of air combat for the group, the 511th FS was despatched on an afternoon mission to the same area. Another dogfight with Bf 109s took place, with the American pilots again giving a good account of themselves. 1Lt 'Wild Bill' Myers was credited with two destroyed to bring his final score to three, plus one damaged,



Right

'Easy does it, Major!' A soldier helps 353rd FS boss, Maj Glenn Eagleston, steer his P-47D along a PSP taxi strip at Rosieres-en-Haye (A-98) during a sortie in the winter of 1944-45. Although his aircraft displays 18.5 kills, 'Eagle' (as the ranking ace of the 354th FG) then 'only' had 16.5 victories. He would add two more during the 354th's second P-51 period (in March 1945), plus two MiGs in Korea with the 4th FIG in 1950-51, for a grand total of 20.5 kills. The 354th applied this distinctive skull and crossbones marking to most of its P-47s during this period (USAF)

Windy City became a grimly appropriate name for this P-47D-28 of the 410th FS/373rd FG, as blizzards quickly covered the dispersals on Le Culot (A-89) airfield, in Belgium, during the winter of 1944-45. Under a canopy of terrible weather, the last German offensive in the west went ahead in mid-December, catching the Allies off guard, and keeping tactical fighters on the ground. The Ninth's invaluable support soon helped straighten the 'Bulge' in the frontline once conditions improved. Poised, along with other squadron Thunderbolts, to add weight to the Allied counter-attack, this P-47 was flown by W J Garrett (via J V Crow)

Outdoor servicing was the lot of most groundcrews attached to the Ninth Air Force's fighter units. Nobody relished an engine change when the weather turned 'arctic', but it had to be done. A lifting bar is swung into position to remove the Pratt & Whitney R-2800 from a P-47D of the 22nd FS at Le Culot – a base the 36th FG shared with the 373rd FG from late October 1944 through to mid-March 1945 (USAF)



Below

This well-known view of Thunderbolts from the crack 354th FG, taxiing out again at Rosières, shows the P-47D-28 assigned to 1Lt Lloyd Overfield, an 11-victory ace of the 353rd FS. If taken from the port side, this photo would have revealed the name *Big Jake* on the engine cowlings. Overfield used this aircraft to destroy two Bf 109s during the famous melee involving the 353rd FS on 19 December. He would score a further two kills when the 'Pioneers' went back to their beloved Mustangs in February 1945. Second to none in terms of combat ability, the 353rd FS was the top-scoring AAF squadron in World War 2 with 295 victories and 21 aces (USAF)

while four other pilots had to be content with 'probable' or 'damaged' claims. Among the latter was Dean 'Preacher' Hess, the ordained minister who had swapped a pulpit for the cockpit of a fighter-bomber for the 'duration'. He had joined the 405th FG in October 1944 as a captain.

The story goes that on 12 December Dean Hess had apparently used a little profanity over the R/T to speed the German aircraft down. Nobody minded this lapse, and Hess himself was quite relieved at his outburst. Demonstrable aggressiveness in air combat proved to his fellow pilots – not all of whom were totally convinced of the preacher's dedication to flying – that Hess believed Nazism to be a greater threat to Christian ideals than any comparable evil. His P-47 was appropriately decorated with a cowlings badge, and the motto 'By Faith I Fly'. Receiving only unconfirmed credit for one Bf 109 probable and one damaged on the 12th, Hess failed to add further to his score during the remainder of his tour.

Quite a character, he went on to fly F-51s in Korea, where he helped train the embryonic Korean air force, before winning world-wide fame for his work with orphans, which he detailed in his book, *Battle Hymn*





(and the film of the same name). 'By Faith I Fly' was still his personal motto, although during his second air war in a decade, Dean Hess had the name of his aircraft presented in Korean characters.

The onset of worsening weather had stalled the Allied advance by mid-December, and just as ground and air forces alike prepared to 'sit out' the appalling winter storms until conditions improved, the Germans struck in what soon became known as the 'Battle of the Bulge'. The enemy had wisely chosen to aim their assault on the Ardennes region of the Allied frontline, which was manned either by inexperienced units new to the theatre, or combat-weary forces sent to 'rest' in this supposed 'backwater'.

On 16 December, undetected German *Panzer* divisions crashed forward through the 'impenetrable' forest and raced towards their target, Antwerp, cutting a swathe through any Allied units that stood in their path. Their initial progress was made that much easier by light ground opposition, and hardly any interference from the air – the tanks were all but invisible under a deep overcast of snow clouds.

On the 17th, the 366th FG at Asch was briefed about the German counter-offensive, and for the first time in three days, the P-47s were able to take off. But the laden clouds threatened a fresh fall of snow at any time, resulting in ceilings as low as 300 ft. 2Lt Mel Paisley, flying as part of Lt Clair Cullinan's Blue Flight, knew that Red and Yellow Flights had also managed to take-off from the frozen wasteland of Asch.

The 'bomb line' lay southwest of Asch, a few minutes' flying time away. Tanks were the target that day, and as the P-47s went in, Bf 109s were called out. Air support for Field Marshal Gerd von Runstedt's ground offensive would make the 'Bulge' doubly memorable for Allied pilots.

Although they had been intercepted, the fighter-bomber pilots knew from experience not to immediately jettison their ordnance (that was the *Jagdfliegern's* goal), for once they had blunted the attack on their own ground forces, they would break off and seek the nearest cloud cover, which were sound tactics, given the circumstances. But at the briefing it had been stressed to the P-47 pilots that their target was an SS *Panzer* column, and they were eager to help out the hard-pressed GIs on the ground.

From the heat of Corsica to the snows of Western Europe, the men of GC II/3 'Dauphine' were obliged to follow the war under 1st TACAF control. These P-47Ds exhibit a mix of markings, with the third aircraft down the line, bearing fuselage number '55', retaining its yellow MTO theatre wing bands, applied when the unit was part of the Twelfth Air Force. Otherwise, these P-47D-30s, including 44-20365 nearest the camera, give away little in terms of unit identity (IWM FRA 201341).



Without the services of the Aviation Engineer Battalions, who laid runways and taxiways in a very short space of time, the operations of the P-47-equipped tactical squadrons within the Ninth Air Force would have been severely hampered. A fully-laden Thunderbolt needed firm ground under its wheels to support seven tons of fuel, bombs, oil, airframe and pilot. This graphic illustration of the humble, but vital, war-winning PSP steel matting shows a 404th FS P-47D moving out at one of five French airfields used by the 371st FG en route to victory (USAF)

Mel Paisley waited as the others plunged into their dive-bombing runs. He saw one Thunderbolt take hits, its ruined hydraulic system letting the wheels flop down. Then a Bf 109 that had attacked the group foolishly tried to get away by diving, so Paisley rammed his throttle forward and rolled over in pursuit of the Messerschmitt. He was flying an aircraft still loaded with bombs, and he was suddenly quite alone.

As the German pilot recognised the danger, he pulled round into a tight climbing turn. Paisley, noting that his chosen target had been joined by his wingman, threw caution to the wind. He had the deflection perfectly set up for 90 degrees and he fired. Fatally hit, the first Bf 109 rolled out to the left, before plummeting towards the ground.

The wingman then swung in behind the Thunderbolt. Dropping his flaps and chopping the throttle, Paisley skidded out of the line of fire and waited for the German to overshoot. Holding his aircraft (P-47D-30 44-20545, nicknamed *La Mort*) in a tight turn, the American fired again. The Bf 109 took a fatal burst at 200 yards' range, and the pilot bailed out.

It was then that Mel Paisley felt reaction setting in. Still carrying bombs, he was about to look for something on the ground to drop them on, but found instead further dogfights between P-47s and Fw 190s.

He manoeuvred into position and opened fire on an enemy fighter for the third time that day, this time without visible results. As the weather closed in, the 390th FS headed for home. Back at Asch, Paisley was understandably refused permission to execute a victory roll with a pair of bombs still hanging under his wings. He landed without

Col Ray J Stecker commanded the 365th FG from 26 June 1944 to 27 April 1945, ably heading up the 'Hell Hawks' through their hardest winter of the war. Among other missions, Stecker led 50 Thunderbolts sortied as escorts for the Operation Varsity Rhine crossing of 24 March 1945. The transport and glider armada stretched for over 100 miles, and the P-47 pilots were told to stick with them at all costs, even if they were attacked. Fortunately, the Luftwaffe did not interfere (USAF)



mishap – and vowed never again to bring ordnance home. While it was prudent not to jettison bombs at the first sign of enemy aircraft, neither was it advisable to bring them home.

Later, the day's score was added up. It came to 13, which was the highest for the 390th FS to date. Although Paisley was credited with one victory on this mission, the second was officially recorded as an 'unconfirmed destroyed' under the Ninth Air Force's scoring system.

The 17th also recorded the sixth kill for 354th FG ace Maj James Dalglish. On his second tour with the group, and now operations officer for the 353rd FS, he was one of a select band of 'Pioneer Mustang Group' pilots to score victories during the 354th's P-47 period. Flying with other elements of the 353rd FS in the vicinity of Kitzingen aerodrome, east of Würzburg, Dalglish shot down a Me 410 – and by so doing won a squadron 'pot'. A few hundred dollars had accumulated as the intended 'reward' for the pilot who destroyed the first aircraft while flying the Thunderbolt. This prize may have been because pilots within the 354th did not consider the P-47 to be half the fighter the P-51 was!

Dalglish destroyed an Fw 190 on Boxing Day for his second, and last, P-47 victory, and he ultimately ended the war with nine confirmed kills.

On 19 December the weather remained bad enough to limit air support operations, although the 354th FG managed to get 12 aircraft aloft once again. The briefed mission for the P-47s was to attack the headquarters of the 116th *Panzer* Division in direct support of VIII Corps, and leading the formation was the 353rd FS's 11-kill Mustang ace, Capt Ken Dahlberg in P-47D-28 42-29336;

'Twelve of us started out, but we got jumped by more than 40 Messerschmitts and had to drop our bombs in order to fight. I'd like to say right now that the Luftwaffe was successful, because it prevented us from car-



French groundcrews shoulder a lifting bar as a 500-lb bomb is manoeuvred onto the wing rack of a P-47 prior to another sortie being flown in support of Maj Gen Robert Webster's US Sixth Army. The *Armée de l'Air* units, raised as part of 1st TACAF in 1944 and equipped with P-47s and other Allied aircraft, were manned by many volunteers who had escaped to North Africa to join Free French units. During 1944, both air- and groundcrews returned, in many cases, to the same bases they had used in 1940, for as part of the First French Air Corps, the Thunderbolt units moved back into France soon after Operation *Dragoon* – the Allied invasion of the south (IWM FRA 850-3)



With aircraft supplied by the US Air Technical Service Command under Lend Lease arrangements, the French had their P-47s supported by AAF depots in Britain, which supplied all necessary spares. These were often flown over in C-47s manned by French crews. Like their American counterparts, technical personnel of the French fighter groups carried out much repair work in the open air. This typical scene shows remedial work being performed on an R-2800 engine (IWM FRA 850-3)



In this photograph, dated 20 February 1945, Lt George Gauthier is seen clambering aboard his P-47D to fly a sortie in support of Allied ground forces. By that time the men on the ground, who would take advantage of the close support offered by French Thunderbolt formations, included their own countrymen, who comprised the First French Army. Having been a part of the *Armée de l'Air* since 1937, Gauthier had flown 186 sorties by February 1945, and seen action over Tunisia, Sicily, Italy and, finally, France. And among his combat claims were three German aircraft and 20 locomotives. The stylised 'invasion stripes' applied for *Dragoon* appear to be narrower in width than the standard AEF stripes. This marking was worn by numerous P-47s, and most consistently by GC III/3 'Ardenne' (IWM 850-3)

rying out our bombing mission. You can't manoeuvre a fighter if you're carrying bombs, so we had to dump them, or get shot down. Four of our fighters never got into the scrap because our formation was broken up by the intense German flak. Eight of us who did get into the fight knocked down nine Germans.'

In the resulting dogfights, Dahlberg of the 353rd FS almost made 'ace in a day' – even a 'double' during the 354th FG's Thunderbolt period was good going, considering that the P-47 was flown by the 'Pioneers' for only three months. The line of reversed-style swastikas on Dahlberg's P-47 grew by three (Bf 109s) that day, and although he personally felt he had downed at least two other Messerschmitt fighters during the course of the action, these remained 'unconfirmed destroyed' – a sixth aircraft was classified as damaged. These were Ken Dahlberg's final kills, taking his tally to 14 destroyed and two damaged. His flying career subsequently came to an abrupt halt on St Valentine's Day when he was shot down (for the third time in six months) and captured – see chapter six for details.

Returning to the engagement of 19 December, another member of the 353rd FS in the form of 1Lt Lloyd Overfield recorded his eighth and ninth victories in this combat when a pair of Bf 109s fell to the guns of his P-47D-28 44-20272, christened *Big Jake*.

Despite out-numbering the Americans, the Luftwaffe had again come off worst, with the 'Pioneers' claiming nine down for three P-47s lost.

This and other combats during the 'Battle of the Bulge' well illustrated the destructive power of the P-47's guns, and the aggressiveness and sound tactics of the American pilots, who were operating in less than ideal conditions. By contrast, the mortal wounding of the Luftwaffe during the

Defence of the Reich campaign of the previous 18 months had drained it of combat-seasoned pilots, and this was felt most in the lack of co-ordination and individual flying skill often exhibited by the *Jagdflieger* of late 1944. Time and again, the Germans were unable to turn their superior numbers (which they frequently enjoyed during this time) into any great advantage. With few notable exceptions, the enemy pilots would regularly lose five to ten per cent of their number, while the American squadrons counted it a bad day if even one per cent 'failed to return'.

These patrols over the Ardennes gave some American fighter-bomber pilots a taste of the air combat they might have felt had eluded them before the German offensive. With many of the original Ninth Air Force flying personnel having completed their tours and returned home, or having been lost in action, squadron rosters were filled with replacements – individuals who might otherwise have seen the enemy only on the ground. Testing their dogfighting skills did not always bring about success, but few shrank from the chance to try.

But as was well known, by this stage of the war the majority of losses suffered by the P-47 units were due to ground fire, not the Luftwaffe. And because of the fluidity of the frontline during the 'Battle of the Bulge', not to mention the poor weather, not all guns that fired at Thunderbolt pilots in December 1944 were manned by Germans! Since D-Day, combat attrition had resulted in inexperienced troops, and whole units, being drafted into battle – including those equipped with multiple AAA guns, and assigned the task of protecting Allied columns from enemy *Jabos*. Sometimes these could be dangerous to friend and foe alike, as Ken Dahlberg realised when his 'flyer's luck' almost deserted him on Boxing Day.

Without having added further to his aerial score, Dahlberg was on a dive-bombing mission in the St Vith area when his P-47 was hit by German flak. With his electrics gone, he had no way to disarm his bombs, so

It was the job of the tactical fighter squadrons to maintain the pressure on enemy ground forces until the end, and the last months of the war saw, in effect, the European and Mediterranean theatres merging. With the Twelfth Air Force, 1st TACAF and the Ninth Air Force all based in France, that had been effectively achieved by the spring of 1945. Wherever their parent groups were sited, the groundcrews judged a base by its facilities – and often there were none at all. In such cases any flat, and preferably well-drained, ground then came into play for the servicing of aircraft. Major work, including tyre and gun barrel changes, is being carried out on this 324th FG P-47D at Tavaux, south-east of Dijon, in the early autumn of 1944 (IWM HU76210)





Bombed up and ready for action, two more 324th FG P-47Ds (from the 316th FS) taxi along the perimeter track at a primitive airstrip in France in the late summer of 1944. Like their counterpart units in the Twelfth and the Ninth Air Forces, this group, which, incidentally, received credit for downing exactly 100 enemy aircraft, maintained a mix of older 'razorback' P-47Ds and newer 'bubbleback' models (via R L Ward)

he promptly salvoed them into an open field. This brought up more flak, but this time from American gunners. The surprise achieved by the German offensive had brought with it confused reports of heightened enemy air activity over the 'elastic' frontline, and the gunners were taking no chances – low-flying fighters dropping bombs had to be hostile!

This situation was compounded by 'latrine rumours' that the Germans were using captured US aircraft, and for Allied pilots, this meant that 'friendly' ground forces – especially AAA units – had to be approached with extreme caution.

Dalhberg, with few options open to him, paid the price. His Thunderbolt hit the ground and slid along on its belly, American small arms fire still popping around it. The ace rode out the slide, exited the cockpit with cracked ribs, and eventually hitched a lift back to Allied lines in a tank.

But by then, although few Allied commanders realised it, the Germans had reached the limit of their counter-offensive. By 24 December they

Topping up the main fuselage tank for a rapid mission turn-around while the pilot straps in, a well-worn P-47D of the 324th FG prepares to return to the fray. If the tactical situation warranted it, Thunderbolt units would lay on two or three missions per day, depending on such vital factors as range and weather. If aircraft serviceability in one unit was down, field commanders would try to combine groups if a particularly tough target was causing the ground troops trouble. 'Tactical air' usually coped in such situations (IWM HU 76209)





were beginning to give ground and fall back under heavy air and ground resistance. A desperate, over ambitious gamble at best, the Ardennes attack could hardly have succeeded once clearer weather made Allied air operations easier.

The 358th FG was ranging out around Kreuznach and Bingen on 30 December when Bf 109s were spotted. Quickly singling out his victim, 1Lt Otto Scherer, of the 366th FS, duly shot one of the Messerschmitts down for his first combat success. One of the few pilots to have served in the Aleutians (where he completed 30 missions with the 344th FS/343rd FG), prior to arriving in the ETO, Scherer may have found the frigid European winter quite to his liking, or perhaps even on the warm side! The cold weather had no detrimental effect on his shooting, for he would achieve ace status by mid-April 1945 – the only pilot to do so within the 358th FG.

On the final day of the year the French air force added its fifth P-47 unit, GC 1/5 'Champagne', to its strength.

The appalling winter of 1944-45 that had swept across the continent of Europe also affected England, which was still the major base for aircraft

Back in the 'dark days' of 1942, the 27th FG had been a dive-bomber outfit equipped with A-24 Banshees (the AAF version of the US Navy's highly successful SBD Dauntless) in the Pacific. Thoroughly routed during the Japanese invasion of the region, the remnants of the group returned to the USA, re-equipped with the A-20 Havoc, and moved to North Africa, where it soon received A-36 Invaders. The 27th FBG's record with the North American fighter-bomber was most impressive, and it operated the aircraft until no replacements could be supplied – production of the A-36 had ended prematurely in mid-1943. The group was issued with 'clapped-out' P-40 Warhawks instead, which it flew until May 1944, when P-47s finally arrived. This Thunderbolt shows the typically plain markings of the 524th FS, which comprised nothing more than a yellow tail band and black aircraft letter. Artwork does, however, appear on the cowlings, and an intriguing marking has been scrawled on the fuselage forward of the 'star and bar' (via C J Brooks)



Seems like a lot! The rest of the message painted on the aircraft in then previous photo is revealed in this close-up. That figure must add up to a good part of the entire Ninth Air Force effort in World War 2! (via C J Brooks)



Sorties that took single-engined fighter over the Apennines had to be planned with more than the usual safety precautions, as these pilots of the 345th FS/350th FG were only too well aware. Another Twelfth Air Force group that rarely got the chance to have a crack at the Luftwaffe during its P-47 period, the 350th's combined total of aerial kills was nevertheless a respectable 53, the majority of which were claimed during the group's early days in North Africa flying the P-38 and P-39. This flight of P-47s was caught on film by the cockpit camera of a fifth aircraft late in 1944 (USAF)

and personnel assigned to the Ninth Air Force. Tactical fighter groups soon began to run short of essential items as the snow prevented the daily shuttle (predominantly by C-47s) of supplies from central depots in the UK to the frontline – airfields at both ends were badly affected by heavy falls of snow.

Despite the recent difficulties, US tactical air forces were well equipped, and numerically strong enough to provide excellent support to the field armies in their final offensive drive into Germany, and to overcome anticipated opposition in the air. With some compositional changes having been made in the autumn, the Ninth Air Force now had three tactical air commands. These were: IX TAC, with six fighter, one nightfighter and four tactical reconnaissance units; XIX TAC, with four fighter, one nightfighter and five reconnaissance units; and XXIX TAC, with four fighter and four reconnaissance units. 1st TACAF had, additionally, four fighter, one nightfighter and three reconnaissance units, plus one provisional reconnaissance fighter group, as well as five French P-47 units.

In Italy, XII TAC had already transferred its P-47-equipped 324th FG to 1st TACAF, plus a nightfighter squadron – a move which reflected both the paramount needs of the Western Front, and a slowdown of the war in the MTO. Three P-47 units, namely the 57th, 79th and 350th FGs, continued to handle the lion's share of ground attack duties, and would remain part of the Twelfth Air Force until the end of the war. 1st TACAF requirements meant that the Twelfth's 27th and 86th FGs would also be transferred in February 1945.

A red kicking mule squadron badge adorned the cowlings of P-47s assigned to the 350th FG's 347th FS. In this line-up of Thunderbolts, the pilot sat in the cockpit of P-47D-30 44-20831 is group commander, Lt Col John Robertson, who took over the 350th in October 1944, and remained at its head until February 1945 (J Robertson)





Above

Moving into Germany in March-April 1945, the tactical P-47 groups were duly placed just a short distance from their targets, and they made the most of it. Occupying Münster/Handorf (Y-94) on 15 April, the 406th FG's 514th FS had the highest squadron number of any unit in the Ninth Air Force. Nearest the camera is P-47D-30 44-32984/'07-S', which also carries the name *SKIPPY* just

forward of the cockpit, and has an all-blue cowlings as per squadron regulations. The tail colour is, however, too extensive in its coverage for the 406th, denoting that this aircraft may have been transferred in from another group such as the 36th (all yellow tail) or 358th (all orange). There was a considerable amount of aircraft exchange at the end of the war (via Campbell)

Extensive use was made of 4.5-in rockets fired from M-10 triple launching tubes slung under the wings of P-47 fighter-bombers. This weapon proved to be particularly popular with Twelfth Air Force units, who often had to attack targets in mountainous terrain that required a 'stand-off' approach. Such targets could be found in the notorious Brenner Pass, which the Germans had filled with murderous flak defences. In the face of such opposition, rockets were a much safer bet than bombs. This P-47D wears the 79th FG's 'striking' yellow lightning bolt marking on an all-blue tail, as well as the emblem of 'The Comanches' squadron (aka the 86th FS) on its cowlings

Below

'Razorback' model Thunderbolts could be seen on most airfields right through to the end of the war, with the 86th FG's inventory, for example, including this war-weary P-47D-25 (42-27972). Note that its serial number has been remarked – in olive drab paint in this case – in the mid-fuselage position favoured by the group following the application of the 86th FG's distinctive red and white tail marking. The bomb-carrying pony motif of the 526th FS also appears on the cowlings (via McDowell)



The morning of 1 January 1945 began at Asch much like any other since the Allied air forces had moved in. The ground was still rock hard after weeks of frost and snow, but the forecast was that the Belgian skies would be clear enough for the day's tactical operations. At 0915 the 366th FG's 390th FS sortied eight P-47s about 15 minutes earlier than scheduled. As the pilots eased their bomb-laden fighters off the runway, they glanced back sympathetically at the unfortunate ground-crew members who had drawn aircraft marshalling duty that bitterly cold morning. On the other side of the airfield, the Thunderbolt pilots could discern the blue-nosed P-51Ds of the 352nd FG preparing to take-off. Also visible were the dispersals occupied by C-47 transports.

Red Flight of the 390th was led by Capt Lowell B Smith, and was comprised of Lts John Kennedy and Melvin Paisley, and Flg Off Dave Johnson. Yellow Flight followed, the eight P-47s having been briefed to carry out an armed reconnaissance over the Ardennes.

As they formed up, the 'Hun Hunters' noticed flak bursts to the east, and then Mel Paisley spotted what the gunners' were firing at. 'Relic Flight Leader, this is "Mop"! Bandits, lots of em. Two o'clock low, coming in on the deck!'

With almost unlimited visibility, what Paisley, and his fellow pilots, saw were Fw 190s and Bf 109s from no less than three *Gruppen* of JG 11 running in on Asch. The flak bursts were from British guns at nearby Ophoven (Y-32), which was also under attack from the same *Geschwader* as part of the massive fighter force executing Operation *Bodenplatte* – the Luftwaffe's mass ground attack on Allied airfields in Belgium and Holland. The Thunderbolt pilots could see the Ophoven attack as they climbed – then they saw JG 11 heading straight for them!

They reacted quickly, and far from surprising Asch, the German pilots were themselves surprised, having either not seen the P-47s turning and diving on their formation, or following orders to the letter, and concentrating on the ground targets. Some aircraft of the 390th were loaded with M-10 triple-tube rocket launchers, including Mel Paisley's. He latched onto the tail of a Bf 109 and fired a salvo of rockets at it, and although Paisley missed with the first two, the third struck home. Using more conventional machine gun fire, he then destroyed two Fw 190s. Five other P-47 pilots scored kills as the attack broke up into a melee of fighters screaming across Asch at tree-top height, some strafing, some crashing.

To the ground personnel, who rarely had the chance to witness air action, the war was now coming straight at them, for JG 11's pilots seemed bent on strafing Asch, come what may. What 'came' was not only the 366th's eight P-47s, but also 22-kill ace Lt Col John C Meyer, and his P-51Ds of the 352nd FG. Other P-47s managed to get off in the teeth of what turned into a full scale 45-minute attack on the airfield by 65 Bf 109s and Fw 190s.

Eight of them were chopped down in short order, probably all by Thunderbolts. And when the Mustangs got into the fight, the German



The closer to victory the Allies got, the more flamboyant the personal schemes on Ninth Air Force Thunderbolts seemed to get! The last months of the war also produced some strange marking anomalies within the Ninth's P-47 groups. For example, the nose badge on *KAREN LEE* (P-47D-22 42-26290) had previously belonged to the 29th FS, which was deactivated in the USA in May 1944! Similar use of defunct unit badges has also been photographically recorded within other frontline P-47 groups. The pilot of this aircraft, Lt Merle D Richey, was probably completely unaware of all this, having more important things on his mind such as ground strafing – in the week of 14-21 March 1945, he alone destroyed over 200 motor vehicles (USAF)

casualties spiralled to 28 aircraft – among the pilots lost was *Experten* Oberstleutnant Gunther Sprecht, *Kommodore* of JG 11. At the end of the day the losses over, and in the vicinity of, Asch had cost JG 11 about 40 per cent of its pilot strength.

Although the American units based at the airfield forestalled the destructive intent of the Luftwaffe, other fighter-bomber groups were not so lucky. The worst hit Ninth Air Force unit was the 365th at Metz, which had been attacked by JG 53. The group lost no fewer than 32 P-47s in the space of ten minutes, mostly from the 386th and 387th FSs.

The latter unit had earlier flown the first mission of the day, its P-47s returning at around 0913. In the meantime, the 388th FS had taken off for an armed reconnaissance of the Homburg area, and about 20 miles from Metz, Capt Jerry G Mast received a call from 'Mudguard' control to say that their base was under attack. Mast immediately ordered bombs to be jettisoned and signalled an immediate return to base.

It was the groundcrews of the 386th FS who were the first to hear the reaction to the Luftwaffe raid as American AAA batteries opened fire. The aircraft recognition 'experts' initially confirmed that the attacking aircraft were British (they could apparently tell by the very loose formation!), or P-51s just 'buzzing' the place, so everyone was amazed when the intruders opened fire. And there was no place to hide. No foxholes had been dug near the aircraft dispersal area, so the crews simply put as much distance between themselves and the bombed-up P-47s as was humanly possible. Even so, the bullets and shells that started ripping across the field five seconds later caused minor casualties.

Hugging the earth, the 365th's groundcrews could only watch as three *Gruppen* of Bf 109G-14s from JG 53 turned Metz into an inferno of blazing aircraft, exploding bombs and detonating ammunition. Overlaid by the sound of their own AAA guns, which claimed eight German fighters destroyed, it seemed to the men on the ground that all of Metz was on fire.

Bodenplatte virtually put the 386th FS 'out of business', losing 12 P-47s destroyed, and having a further seven badly damaged. The 387th was also hit hard, with nine destroyed and one damaged, while the 388th escaped lightly with a single P-47 destroyed and three damaged. For a few weeks, pending replacements, the 386th had to share aircraft with its sister units.

Prior to *Bodenplatte*, the Ardennes offensive had brought about a number of base changes for Ninth Air Force P-47 groups. These had been pre-planned, although some locations were changed much quicker than anticipated as a result of the 1 January attack. To bolster air cover for the front in the Metz area, the 358th FG was sent to the 'Hell Hawks' base from its temporary home at Reims (A-62) late on New Year's Day – as they landed, the pilots could see the wreckage of the 365th FG's P-47s, some of which were still burning in the aftermath of the German strike.

As was quickly realised on both sides, *Bodenplatte* was a 'self-inflicted wound' for the Luftwaffe. With few pilots lost, the Allies could replace all aircraft destroyed in the attack within days, as indeed could the Germans. However, the Luftwaffe could not replace men with the necessary experience to lead the novices that now made up much of the fighter arm.

In January, the number of air support sorties flown began to increase as the renewed Allied advance got into high gear with the passing of the worst of the winter weather. As one example among hundreds, the 366th FG carried out a spectacular series of strikes on the 24th which resulted in the destruction of 159 items of German motor transport, 12 tanks, 30 AFVs, four horse-drawn carts and 47 gun positions.

FEBRUARY 1945

By February the Allied tactical air forces were well and truly 'back in business'. On the continent, P-47s still predominated in the Ninth, although the 354th was about to relinquish its Thunderbolts for Mustangs once again. And although P-38s still equipped two groups, this situation was also changing. Having flown the Lightning with excellent combat results since May 1944, the 367th FG – alias the 'Dynamite Gang' – was understandably reluctant to part with it. But training on the P-47 had commenced the previous December, and by February the die was cast. Each squadron flew its first full Thunderbolt mission on three different days: 16th (392nd FS); 21st (394th FS); and 26th (393rd FS).

On the 8th of the month Otto Scherer of the 358th FG downed two Bf 109s (entered in the records as F-models, but almost certainly *Gustavs* at this late stage in the war) east of Offenburg. Another two months would pass before Scherer encountered the *Jagdwaaffe* again, but when he did so on 11 April, he claimed his fourth Bf 109. Six days later he 'made ace', and this time his fifth, and last, kill was a Bf 108 liaison aircraft.

Operations usually dictated that the luxury of a stand-down to affect a smooth transition from one aircraft type to another could not always be allowed. In such a case, mixed formations were sometimes flown until enough new aircraft arrived from depots to equip the entire group. Such



Apart from the fact that *FICKLE FLOSSY III* was on the strength of the 366th FG near war's end, little more is known about this Thunderbolt. Numerous P-47Ds of the Ninth (and all other air forces, come to that) were photographed solely for their striking nose-art, there being few other details recorded to last another 50 years or so (via Campbell)

a dive-bombing mission against rail and road transport behind the 'Siegfried Line', he was shot down by flak whilst flying his regular P-47D-28 (42-28336). An 88 mm shell hit the aircraft just behind the cockpit, and Dahlberg later reported that he thought the aircraft had been blown in half – possibly by exploding oxygen tanks, which were located close to where the shell had struck the aircraft on his late-model Thunderbolt.

Dahlberg, who momentarily blacked out, found himself tumbling through space, but managed to pull the ripcord. Safely on the ground, he did his best to evade and get back to Allied lines (which he had successfully done in August 1944), but lost his sense of direction and was captured the following day after walking in a huge circle!

COMPARISONS

A certain rivalry existed between pilots who flew the P-47 and P-51, and many individuals in the Eighth Air Force were in a position to judge which fighter they considered to be the best, having flown both in combat. Few Ninth Air Force groups ever flew Mustangs, although of course the 354th FG went from P-51s to P-47s, and back to P-51s. Quite apart from the desire by AAF commanders to standardise the Eighth Air Force on P-51s and the Ninth on P-47s, the changeover of both organisations was made more urgent by events. P-51 ace Clayton Gross remembered:

'The beautiful P-51D's six 0.50-cal guns instead of four (in the P-51B and C) unfortunately weakened the wing structure, and we lost a number of planes (and pilots) when wings peeled off while dive-bombing. The P-51Ds were grounded, and we found ourselves in transition to the gigantic, and lumbering, P-47.'

The 354th FG's first P-47 mission was flown on 26 November, by which time the group had been credited with 492 destroyed, 45 probably destroyed and 219 damaged claims in the air.

Clayton Gross flew eight P-47 missions before taking leave on the French Riviera in January 1945. The 'brass' agreed to the 354th's impassioned requests to return to the P-51, because:

'Rumour had it that IX TAC boss, Brig Gen Elwood 'Pete' Quesada, was proud of our leading ETO record, and could see it slipping the longer we flew Thunderbolts. By the end of our P-47 period, our claims had

a turn of events depended on the aircraft type in question – too dissimilar a performance between the two made such a move impracticable.

For example, mixed P-47/P-51 sorties are not known to have been flown by the 354th FG, which recorded the last Thunderbolt mission by both the 353rd and 355th FSs on 15 February – the 353rd retained its P-47s a day longer.

As mentioned in then previous chapter, on the 14th the 'Pioneers' finally lost the services of Ken Dahlberg. Leading two flights of Thunderbolts from the 353rd FS on

risen to 514-46-226, meaning that we had added just 22-1-7 in a little less than three months. We shot down four on the first day back in P-51s.

'The difference between the two fighters, in this pilot's opinion, is that I had super confidence in the P-51, even though I was shot down by rifle fire while strafing and had to bail out just before the P-47 transition. On the other hand, on a Thunderbolt dive-bombing mission near Bastogne during the "Battle of the Bulge", I took a 20 mm cannon shell in the engine and did not know I had been hit until the groundcrews started running alongside and pointing when I landed.

'The P-47 had tremendous firepower from the eight 0.50s. I once strafed a train from the side and tipped a boxcar over with the impact! Also, I am probably one of the few who can personally testify to that impact. After we went back onto the P-51, I flew a mission to the Berlin area. We were engaged in a gigantic dogfight, and I shortly found myself alone. I got on the tail of an Me 109 and being a crafty veteran, checked my own tail before shooting. I spotted two P-47s boring in. "Good", I said, "I've got help".

'I returned to my target and got multiple strikes on the 109, before my world exploded. I had the sensation of a baseball bat to the back of the neck and an involuntary snap roll followed and then a spin. I figured I was dying, for my canopy was gone, as well as a good section of my left wing.

'I put a gloved hand to the back of my neck and pulled it away dripping a red substance – blood? No, hydraulic fluid, as it turned out. I recovered from the spin, only to find my two P-47 friends coming in for the kill. Violent rocking of my battered wings stopped further assault as they finally recognised me. I got a good look as the red-nosed P-47s bearing the call letters "HV", identifying them as from the 61st FS/56th FG.

'The seat armour plate of the P-51 was distended four inches in the area of the pilot's neck, but it had not been pierced. I got home, where I think the plane was junked – but believe me, the "Jug" packed a punch.'

It was comparatively rare for the tactical groups to encounter, and be in a position to destroy, German jet aircraft, and by late February only one or two had even been seen by Ninth Air Force units. But on the 22nd, Lt Oliven T Cowan of the 365th 'Hell Hawks' attacked an Me 262, and later received credit for its destruction.

Similar victory confirmation went to Lt David B Fox of the 366th FG, who also attacked an Me 262 on the same day as Cowan. In total, Ninth Air Force/1st TAF pilots accounted for 19 Me 262s destroyed between February and April, with the last two being half-shares for four pilots, including P-47 men Capt Jerry G Mast and Lt William H Myers of the 365th FG. The penultimate final jet claimed by the Ninth, on 25 April, fell to the guns of Mustangs from the 370th FG – 13 of the overall total of 19 claimed were shot down by P-47s.

P-47D-30 44-21043 "CORNBY BABE"
enjoyed an impressive combat career in the 366th FG judging by the extensive mission markers liberally painted beneath the cockpit. Its pilot, who sadly remains anonymous, claimed one aerial victory, three tanks and three locomotives destroyed. Again, no further details of this particular Thunderbolt are currently to hand (via Campbell)



The honour of claiming the last Me 262 to fall to a Ninth Air Force pilot went to Capt Robert W Clark of the 50th FG on 26 April. His unit was then part of 1st TACAF, and his victory, along with that of Lt John J Usiatynski of the 358th some 18 days before, were the last two jet kills claimed by Ninth Air Force P-47s. Other successes over the German jets were achieved by individual Thunderbolt pilots of the 371st, 324th and 27th FGs when they were part of 1st TACAF – interestingly, not a single kill was claimed by a Ninth Air Force ace against a jet.

As the last of the six French P-47 units to go operational prior to VE-Day, GC III/6 'Roussillon' flew its first ground attack sorties on 1 February. Three days later, tragedy befell the French Thunderbolt force when Lt Edmond Marin la Meslée, CO of GC I/5 'Champagne', was struck by a 40 mm shell and killed attacking a vehicle convoy in the Hart forest, in the Alsace region. The leading *Armée de l'Air* ace of the Battle of France in 1940, he had scored 16 confirmed and four probable victories with GC I/5 on the Hawk 75, but had been unable to increase his score during the intervening years (see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 28 - French Aces of World War 2* for further details).

MARCH 1945

In early March the Allied armies found the last intact bridge spanning the Rhine at Remagen, secured it, and began to pour troops and vehicles into Germany. Lee Hudson of the 313th FS/50th FG noted some personal impressions of this period – and gave an insight into how difficult it could be for a pilot to score kills over the Luftwaffe:

'The ground forces had crossed the Rhine and everything was confusion. I was leading a flight of eight planes on a sweep east of the Rhine to harass the enemy in any way that we could. After having strafed a few vehicles, we were at about 8000 ft and cruising around looking for targets of opportunity. Suddenly, I saw two Fw 190s on the deck, headed east. We hadn't seen any enemy aircraft for quite a while, and I had never had a real opportunity to shoot one down. I called Blue Leader to stay up for top cover, and peeled off with my four planes to attack the Jerries. By the time I got to about 3000 ft, I was doing about 450 mph, and closing fast on the trailing Jerry. Here was my chance to be a hero, and get two planes on one pass, so I opened fire at about 800-1000 yards.

'I didn't know whether the Jerry saw me or my tracers first, but he broke sharply to the right and the lead plane broke sharply left. I tried to turn with the rear plane but was going too fast; my wingman was right there with me and we both overshot. John Wiley was leading the second element, and he followed the Jerry leader and shot him down.

'I completely lost the trailing Jerry, and wound up with nothing but embarrassment, and no chance of becoming an ace. Naturally, when I got home I gave the armament people hell for bore-sighting my guns at 500 yards, instead of 1000 yards.'

Lee Hudson would have been more downcast to learn that John Wiley received no official credit for 'his' Fw 190, but then nobody had said that aerial combat was particularly easy, or that victories over the Germans were a foregone conclusion, even at this late stage of the war.

It was 14 March before Lt Col Paul Douglas of the 368th FG became an ace, more than five months having passed since he scored his third and

fourth kills (both, Fw 190s, with two more Focke-Wulfs as 'unconfirmed destroyed'), over Koblenz, on 20 October 1944. By now part of the 368th FG's HQ flight, he dispelled any doubts he may have had in his ability to get 'sure' victories when he destroyed three Fw 190s in the Frankfurt area whilst flying a P-47D-30. These were Douglas's final kills of the war.

Like numerous other Ninth Air Force pilots, Lt Col Douglas's tally of seven victories also featured two 'unconfirmed destroyed' claims. While this assessment may have been viewed as completely honest, assuming lack of supporting evidence and/or discovery of wreckage, these 'credits' do not appear to have been investigated very thoroughly at the time – although individual AAF pilots rarely had the opportunity to pursue such matters before being rotated home. It was just as well if a pilot managed to score other kills to achieve ace status, thus removing any doubts.

Allied fighters were now ranging freely across the Rhine, and by the end of March the first three Ninth Air Force P-47 groups had moved into German airfields. The honour of being the first group to do so fell to the 365th, which had occupied Aachen (Y-46), just east of the Belgian/German border, on the 16th. A small piece of wartime history was made by the group later that same day when 1 Lt John H Rogers took off from the recently-captured airfield to fly the first combat mission undertaken by an American fighter unit from Germany. This event was widely heralded in the US press, and endorsed by Maj Gen Quesada.

Having prepared the strip from 'a sea of mud', the 818th Engineer Aviation Battalion was justly proud to have completed the job in a matter of days, and the newly-arrived pilots were delighted to have finally obtained showers – a highly desirable luxury. Aachen was far from perfect due to the ever-present mud, but the 365th FG remained there until moving to Fritzlar (Y-86) on 13 April. By then, the 48th FG had also arrived in Germany, moving from St Trond (A-92) to Kelz (Y-54) on 26 March.

Three days after the 365th had flown to Aachen, the ex-P-38 equipped 367th FG (having become thoroughly familiar with the P-47) carried out a spectacular dive-bombing attack on a castle at Ziegenburg. Hoping that the German C-in-C West would be caught by the raid, the group reduced the castle to ruins. Having to make for the cellars, Albert Kesselring, and visiting armaments minister Albert Speer, just escaped with their lives.

APRIL 1945

As the edges of the AAF's areas of operations became increasingly blurred by fast moving events in Germany, on the fringes of the fighting, ground support operations continued much as before. In Italy, units rarely changed bases as often as those supporting the armies now fighting in Germany. For one thing, the facilities on offer in the MTO were not as good, and any lack of range had ceased to become much of an issue for those groups flying P-47s. Another factor was the relatively static nature of the war on the Italian front until the closing months of the conflict. The Fifteenth Air Force bomber escort task had, for some time, been in the capable hands of the 31st, 52nd, 325th and the all-negro 332nd FGs, all flying P-51s, plus the P-38 equipped 1st, 14th and 82nd FGs.

This effectively meant that the tactical P-47 groups in-theatre almost certainly had less encounters with the Luftwaffe than their contemporaries in the ETO, but no unit was totally exempt, as the 350th FG found



1Lt Melvyn Paisley's P-47D-30 (44-20545) *La Mort* lies abandoned to its fate at the 366th FG's Münster/Hahndorf base after its pilot had been posted home. All nine of Paisley's claimed kills are marked under the cockpit, his official score being confirmed as five. The pilot himself removed the cover over the radio hatch with his groundcrew details as a souvenir – see the photo on page 86. The artwork on the nose of the fighter depicted a grieving widow (Paisley)

out on 2 April 1945. Then based at Pisa, under the command of Lt Col John C Robertson, the group had been flying the P-47 since the summer of 1944. On the day in question, the 350th was given the task of simultaneously bombing a rail bridge in the Brenner Pass, escorting B-25s out of the area after their own attack on the target, and also providing an escort for a second group of Mitchells doing much the same thing further south!

The 346th 'Checker Board' and 347th 'Screaming Red Ass' FSs were involved, but only the former carried bombs on its P-47s. Defence of that area was by then exclusively the responsibility of ANR units equipped with the Bf 109, and these were warned by their Rome control that the American bombers and fighters were on their way. In turn, the US crews also had plenty of warning of enemy fighter activity.

Putting up 25 Bf 109Gs to take on 32 P-47s and 54 B-25s, the Italians did not lack courage. What they did lack, however, was co-ordinated control and mutual cover, which was so necessary for bringing down bombers – their primary targets – and to keep the fighters busy. ANR pilots also often acted individually, attacking without the support of a wingman.

As the opposing fighters met, a series of separate dogfights developed, with the Americans quickly gaining the upper hand. Lt Richard P Sulzbach of the 346th FS chased a Bf 109 with such determination that the Italian pilot, his aircraft damaged by 0.50-cal fire, lost control and went straight into the ground. Capt Frank Heckenkamp of the 347th FS pursued a climbing formation of Messerschmitts and destroyed the 'tail end Charlie' – the pilot bailed out. He then meted out the same treatment to a second Bf 109 moments later, before quickly despatching a third, which was abandoned by its pilot, who survived. A whole minute had passed. Whilst in the act of destroying a fourth Bf 109, Heckenkamp found himself out of ammunition after a few rounds. Flying on his wing was 2Lt Robert Taylor, who delivered the *coup de grace* to the enemy fighter by causing an engine fire, and then blowing off its right wing.

That day, the Italians lost aircraft through combat, accidents and their own flak, with the carnage only ending after two pilots of the 345th FS,

on a dusk patrol in the vicinity of Aviano, downed the last of them. The day's score totalled 14 Bf 109s, with no losses to the AAF – despite Italian claims to the contrary. In air combat terms, it was one of the most successful days in the 350th's history – and one of the blackest for the ANR.

Tactical missions continued without pause for the Ninth's P-47 groups, despite clear signs that the German position was hopeless. But until positive moves were made to end hostilities on specified Allied terms, the war went on. And the Luftwaffe remained active over some sectors of the front, as the 373rd FG found out on the afternoon of 8 April.

Clashing with the potentially deadly Fw 190D, the group lost two P-47s during an aerial engagement that was fought on a large scale for that period of the war. It was certainly the most successful ever experienced by pilots serving in the group at that time, many of whom may have given up all hope of testing their skills against those of the enemy. Suddenly, they were doing just that – and they were not found wanting, as the Americans returned home to report 12 aircraft destroyed. All were confirmed by the Ninth Air Force's credit board, the total being shared between eight pilots. The 410th FS's 1Lt Talmadge Ambrose, flying his personal P-47 *Dorothy K*, almost 'made ace' that day with four confirmed, while 2Lt Daniel D A Duncan was credited with three, plus a damaged.

The Luftwaffe unit involved in this combat was almost certainly JG 26, which was itself heavily committed to ground attack missions similar to those being flown by the P-47 groups at that time. The *Geschwader* reported a clash with US fighters taking place in the vicinity of Hildesheim airfield, although they claimed their assailants were P-51s.

The following day Maj Robert Johnston, CO of the 50th FG's 81st FS, joined the ranks of the select band of Ninth Air Force aces when he downed two Fw 190s encountered in the Crailsheim area. This action took his final score to six, and made him the sole P-47 ace of the 50th FG.

On 9 April, the 373rd had come close to getting its first ace since the 412th FS's 1Lt David King had taken his tally to five back on 23 December 1944. The group was given another opportunity on the 11th, and this time 1Lt Edward Edwards rose to the occasion. Late in the afternoon, the 411th was sent to strafe Sachau airfield, where the squadron encountered, a substantial force of Fw 190s.

In the resulting melee, Edwards destroyed four fighters to take his tally to 5.5 – he had previously been credited with a Bf 109 on 15 August 1944, and half an Fw 190 on the same day David King had 'made ace'. Less fortunate was squadronmate 1Lt Robert Burns, who destroyed two Fw 190s (and damaged two more) to add to his previous pair of Bf 109s 'confirmed' and solitary 'unconfirmed probable' from 1944 – the latter had been originally claimed as 'destroyed', but was subsequently downgraded.

The conservative scoring system employed by the Ninth Air Force would also have an effect on the 390th FS's 1Lt Mel Paisley that would last right to the end of the war. Having been credited with four kills (three of which came on 1 January, along with one 'unconfirmed destroyed' and three 'unconfirmed damaged'), he would have to wait until 14 April to receive his next 'confirmed' success. On that day Paisley 'mixed it' with an Fw 190, along with his wingman Lt Currie Davis, leaving the German fighter ablaze in a field near Hevelberg. Upon returning to the unit's new home at Handorf (Y-94), Mel Paisley was credited with a half-kill.



Wielding a screwdriver, Mel Paisley removes the radio panel cover plate from *La Mort*. This plate was simply screwed onto a pilot's newly-assigned P-47 soon after it was allocated to him, thus saving the groundcrew from having to paint the names on the replacement aircraft. This practise extended to exchanging full engine cowling panels if the nose-art was particularly well done, or if the pilot had paid good money to have it rendered (*Paisley*)

Having arrived at the base just three days before, the 366th FG had continued to fly ground support sorties. Flying with HQ flight staffer, Paul Ollerton, Paisley sortied again on the 20th in his personal P-47 *La Mort* for one of its last war missions. Ollerton was flying his regular aircraft, *Lucky Marie*, and the two pilots headed out towards Potsdam, their intention being to stir up a little action at the nearby airfield.

Sure enough, as the two fighters approached, a lone Fw 190 was spotted at ten o'clock low. Paisley dove, but the P-47 was going too fast for a sure kill. He fired anyway, and observed some strikes. The Focke-Wulf quickly latched onto Paisley's tail, and Ollerton closed to shoot the bandit down. The Americans planned a 'set-up', with Paisley rolling slowly before pulling out – a manoeuvre the Fw 190 would surely follow, all ready for Ollerton to fire. It didn't quite work out that way, for as he began the roll, Paisley felt his aircraft stagger under the hammer blows of 0.50-cal bullets. Ollerton had badly misjudged things, spraying his colleague with bullets before despatching the Fw 190. The kill was shared, and Mel Paisley's half-victory confirmed that he was now an ace.

With the war racing towards its inevitable conclusion, many tactical sorties were flown without a sight of the enemy in the air, but on 18 April, Maj Jim Hill shot down three Bf 109s southwest of Juterborg to make him the 365th FG's second ace. The group subsequently finished the war believing that it had three aces – Hill, Bob Coffey and Maj Robert Fry of the 388th FS, who had claimed seven, but official postwar scrutiny of the scores downgraded the latter individual's tally to four. That brought the group's count of 'near-aces' to seven, all of whom had claimed four kills.

1ST TACAF IN GERMANY

Having left the Mediterranean theatre of operations behind them in February to become part of 1st TACAF, the Twelfth Air Force's 27th and 86th FGs moved into France, and thence to Germany, in similar fashion to their Ninth Air Force counterparts. On 17 April the 86th FG left Tantonville (Y-1) for Braunschardt (Y-76), located on the west side of the Rhine near Darmstadt. It was from here that the group's red and white tailed P-47s launched on a final, and very hazardous, series of strafing missions against German airfields. Most of these harboured jets, which were not only widely dispersed and camouflaged as to be almost impossible to spot from the air, but were well defended by multiple flak guns.

Little aerial action had come the way of the 86th's pilots, but these difficult missions prompted men like Capt John P Botten to paint up his P-47 with rows of crosses, signifying ground kills made during these last sorties. Botten, himself, had achieved no aerial kills, but few were going to argue the finer points of air/ground victory credits at that stage of war.

Pilots of the 'Candy Stripers' group had not many more than a dozen kills credited, and some pilots never had the chance to even fire at enemy aircraft in the air, much less become aces. But the AAF's publicity machine had always liked visible evidence that its pilots were destroying the Luftwaffe, and kill markings duly appeared on some 86th FG P-47s.

Few such embellishments seem to have appeared on aircraft of the 27th FG, however. The original MTO A-36 outfit, the 27th had flown hand-me-down P-40s before converting to the P-47 in June 1944. Having left St Dizier (A-64) in February, the unit, which had two DUCs to its credit,

moved on French soil at Toul/Ochey (A-90) until March 1945, when it stayed to Biblis, just across the Rhine from Worms.

On 20 April the 86th, then led by Lt Col George T Lee, received a second DUC for strafing five enemy airfields. Other P-47 groups carried out similar sorties during this period, and all participants agreed that they were as far from a series of 'milk run' as it was possible to get.

Over at Pisa, ground strafing was also a priority for the 350th FG, where the Allied air forces was still pounding the Italians and Germans in their desperate attempt to hold territory, and stave off certain defeat. Sporadic air combat and, more often, attacks on airfields, kept enemy air opposition – primarily the ANR – well contained, and increasingly ineffectual. Among the pilots of the 346th FS, 1Lt Raymond Knight was a particularly dedicated exponent of destroying the aircraft on the ground. The 350th was then short of fighters, and Knight had recently taken over a P-47 transferred from the Brazilian unit attached to the group.

On 25 April he had attacked Bergamo airfield, but had been severely hit by flak in return. Struggling to get his precious P-47D (nicknamed *Oh Johnnie*) back to Pisa over the Appenine Mountains, Knight was lost when the long-suffering Thunderbolt finally crashed. His dedication to duty in the face of adversity brought him a posthumous Medal of Honor – the second one awarded to a Thunderbolt pilot in World War 2.

Ground attack units had for some time been on call to fly escort missions to cover medium bomber formations, particularly when German jets were known to be active. The 50th FG drew this duty on 26 April, putting up 16 P-47s to contribute to a four-group strong force to protect both the 17th BG and a formation of French Air Force B-26s.

Unable to prevent casualties among the Marauders as JV 44 attacked, the Thunderbolt pilots nevertheless ruined the cohesion of the German interception, and left one Me 262 diving away, hit by rounds from the bomber gunners. At the controls was none other than General Adolf Galland, leader of this elite unit. He was in turn attacked by the P-47 flown by Lt James J Finnegan, leading Green Flight of the 10th FS. Galland continued to dive away, momentarily leaving the P-47 behind.

Finnegan, who had not previously seen a jet, had actually completed his tour of 127 missions and was not scheduled to fly that day. Indeed, he was only aloft in an effort to 'kill time' before awaiting permission to marry!

Over the B-26s' target at Schrobenehausen, Finnegan heard the warning 'Jet Bandits!', which alerted the pilots. He then spotted Galland's fighter and dived after it. Not even an Me 262 could easily escape a P-47 in a power dive, and Finnegan soon caught up with him, and got off a short burst of fire. He observed strikes to the jet's right wing root, before Galland banked left into cloud.

Finnegan broke off the pursuit and returned to home, where he duly reported the encounter, and was credited with a damaged and 'probable'. Nobody in the group knew who the German jet pilot was, and it was not until many years later that Finnegan, himself, found out. The upshot of the combat was that Galland, having brought off an exceptional dead stick landing, had suffered a knee injury painful enough for him to be hospitalised, and lost to JV 44 for the remaining weeks of the war.

By 30 April the balance of the Ninth's P-47 groups were all based on German soil, and well placed to fly their final short-range missions into



Mel Paisley's final unofficial score is recorded in swastikas on *La Mort*. This pilot was not alone in being handicapped by the Ninth Air Force's victory credit board, which seemed to require '101 per cent' evidence of the destruction of enemy aircraft in air combat. Its odd classification 'unconfirmed destroyed' was, at very least, a source of frustration for many would-be aces (Paisley)

Proof, if any were really needed, that the war fronts had become one, and finally annihilated the Third Reich, was reinforced by the sight of Thunderbolt groups from the far away Mediterranean theatre on German airfields. This 87th FS P-47D was seen at München/Reim (R-82) in the summer of 1945, the 79th FG occupying the hardstands used just a few months before by the Me 262s of Adolf Galland's JV 44. Half-completed yellow lightning flashes on the 79th's blue vertical tail were not an uncommon sight – painting such a marking took a lot of time! (via J V Crow)



the enemy heartland. One group that was highly appreciative of this move was the 405th 'Thunder Monsters', for Germany meant barracks rather than tents, with temperamental stoves for heating, flush toilets and real beds – the works! Everyone rated it the best accommodation since leaving South Carolina in February 1944.

The fact that Allied aircraft were flying missions from inside Germany illustrated how futile further resistance was, although no surrender moves were notified to the Allies. But with the near total destruction of her military forces, and Hitler's suicide on 30 April, the end was only days away.

MAY 1945

As the ground forces pushed further into German, the number of targets for the fighter-bombers proportionately dwindled, and on 3 May the 366th FG flew its last mission. Ranging out over the harbours at Kiel and Flensburg, the P-47s attacked shipping and port installations – although in areas such as this, Allied commanders realised there was little to be gained in damaging ports that would soon be in friendly hands. They would only have to be repaired before use by their 'new owners'.

The Germans themselves carried out demolitions, and destroyed much equipment, including aircraft on certain airfields. But the results of this policy were patchy, and occupying troops would find a vast amount of intact war materiel all over the shattered country.

When the guns fell silent in Europe on 8 May 1945, the immediate future looked bright. This was particularly true for the Americans, whose homeland was thousands of miles away from the devastation. As far as air force personnel were concerned, rotation back to the 'States was only a matter of time. Some groups drew months of occupation duty in Germany, but for the majority of the men who had flown tactical missions, the job was done. The cohesion of the combat groups rapidly crumbled as aircraft stood silent, and names were ticked off for that magic release.

Statistically, it would have been almost impossible for the tactical P-47 group not to have scored victories over the Luftwaffe, and all units indeed had individual pilots who had shot down the enemy in relatively small numbers to contribute to an accumulative unit total. The 368th FG emerged as the top scoring Ninth Air Force P-47 unit with 129 victories confirmed. In almost joint second place were the 365th and 362nd, the former pipping the latter by a half-kill – 121.5 versus 121!

Of all the Ninth's groups, the 354th was, not surprisingly, head and shoulders above the rest with its overall total of 637, which placed it second only to the 56th FG as the top-scoring P-47 group in the ETO. The short time that the 354th had flown the Thunderbolt resulted in an understandably low score of 15, the balance being achieved during its two long spells flying the P-51. As far as individual squadrons were concerned,

the 354th also took top honours, for its component 353rd FS emerged as the leader of all AAF units worldwide, with 295 kills.

In total, the Ninth Air Force's fighter-bomber groups had officially destroyed 1148 aircraft, whilst their equivalents in the Twelfth and

Fifteenth Air Forces had accounted for a further 1047 combined – many of the latter units had flown the P-47 for only part of their time in the MTO. That meant a total of 2195 aircraft denied to the enemy by units which were primarily deployed on duties other than air combat. In the Ninth, with its stringent claims system, the true tally was probably higher.

On the other side of the coin were the losses. Although American fighter pilots generally enjoyed a remarkably high survival rate in the ETO and MTO, ground fire accounted for the highest percentage of losses. Individual groups returned casualty figures not always in direct proportion to the effort made. Some were higher, whilst others were lower than might have been expected. The 405th FG was a case in point.

In combat for 13 months, the group lost 75 pilots killed, or made prisoner, in 1358 missions. German flak, universally reckoned by pilots to be their greatest adversary, invariably comprised the infamous 88 mm gun and the quad-mounted 20mm – the latter was reckoned to have brought down more Allied fighter-bombers than any other German weapon.

With peace only hours old, the 405th FG held a victory parade at Kitzingen. After a flyover by the unit's P-47s, a surprise item on the programme was... the Luftwaffe! A group of Ju 87s and Fw 190s entered the circuit and landed, the result being that the erstwhile enemy's most highly decorated soldier, Hans-Ulrich Rudel, 'surrendered' to the awed base personnel. It was a fitting, if slightly bizarre, end to the war.

As the guns fell silent in Europe, the Allied tactical air forces could look back on a job thoroughly well done. The statistics of destruction were awesome, the evidence of it visible all around the occupation airfields. Victory had been possible as a result of many factors, not the least of which was reliable, tough aircraft, available in great number, and flown by motivated pilots using – by today's standards – relatively simple weapons.

Narrowing it all down to individual aircraft types, it is hard to see how battlefield superiority (to use more modern jargon) could have been achieved in Europe without the superlative P-47 Thunderbolt. This much was continually stressed by higher echelons – army generals, field commanders and 'GI Joe', who still had to take and hold the ground on which the tank, pillbox, railway or bridge wrecked by airpower rested. TAC wartime publicity did not shrink from a suitable quote on how the troops felt about their 'air'. It was simple. 'We love you guys'.

As this brief summary of operations by the Ninth and Fifteenth US Air Forces concentrates almost entirely on aces, it has to give groups such as the 36th, 367th, 371st, 405th and 406th (all in the Ninth) only a brief mention. The same is true for the P-47 groups that remained part of the Twelfth Air Force – the 27th, 57th, 79th, 86th, 324th and 350th. While there were aces in some of these outfits, their pilots had tended to score all their kills during the early part of the war on aircraft other than the P-47.

Equally, some groups achieved modest air combat scores simply because they had very few chances to meet Axis forces in the air. Such arbitrary division is no way intended to detract from the illustrious achievements of the 'rank and file' pilots of the tactical groups, who performed one of the most useful, difficult and least publicised frontline missions of the war. It is hoped that the reader will appreciate that World War 2 involved a great many people known only to a small circle of colleagues, who contributed to a huge team effort unparalleled in history.

APPENDIX 1

Combat Claims

Unique among the US air forces in recording individual claims for aerial victories as 'unconfirmed destroyed, damaged and probable', the Ninth Air Force made accurate assessment of definite victories difficult. These categories were intended to give some leeway pending possible later confirmation, but this could not be done in every case. This has led to the situation whereby pilots still have a number of unconfirmed claims to their name to this

day, and it seems unlikely as the years continue to roll by from these events that any more definite accreditation of victories will be possible. That said, the remains of a substantial number of German pilots who disappeared after being observed as having been shot down in aerial combat continue to be uncovered across Western Europe and, in such cases, the Allied pilot responsible has often been confirmed.

APPENDIX 2

Combat Debut for Ninth Air Force Fighter Groups

<i>England</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>England</i>	<i>France</i>
354th - 1/12/43 (P-51)	23/6/44	48th - 20/4/44	28/6/44
358th - 20/12/43	16/7/44	474th - 25/4/44	6/8/44
362nd - 22/2/44	2/7/44	404th - 1/5/44	6/7/44
365th - 22/2/44	29/6/44	370th - 1/5/44 (P-38)	24/7/44
363rd - 24/2/44 (P-51)	5/7/44	50th - 1/5/44	25/6/44
366th - 14/3/44	20/6/44	373rd - 8/5/44	19/7/44
368th - 14/3/44	19/6/44	36th - 8/5/44	17/7/44
405th - 11/4/44	30/6/44	406th - 9/5/44	31/7/44
371st - 12/4/44	23/6/44	367th - 9/5/44 (P-38)	22/7/44

APPENDIX 3

Ninth Air Force Fighter Groups to France, 1944 (in date order)

19 June (368th)	2 July (362nd)	24 July (370th)
20 June (366th)	5 July (363rd)	31 July (406th)
23 June (354th* & 371st)	6 July (404th)	6 August (474th)
25 June (50th)	16 July (358th)	
28 June (48th)	17 July (36th)	
29 June (365th)	19 July (373rd)	
30 June (405th)	22 July (367th**)	

Notes

* equipped with P-47 11/44 to 2/45

** re-equipped with P-47s 2/45

APPENDIX 4

Ninth Air Force Fighter Groups to Germany, 1945 (in date order)

365th Aachen (Y-46) - 16 March	367th Eschborn (Y-74) - 10 April
48th Kelz (Y-54) - 26 March	366th Handorf (Y-94) - 11 April
36th Aachen (Y-86) - 28 March	368th Frankfurt/Rhein-Main (Y-73) - 15 April
404th Kelz (Y-54) - 30 March	406th Handorf (Y-94) - 15 April
358th Sandhofen (Y-90) - 2 April	50th Giebelstadt (Y-90) - 20 April
371st Eschborn (Y-74) - 7 April	373rd Lippstadt (Y-98) - 20 April
354th Ober Ulm (Y-64) - 8 April	405th Kitzingen (R-6) - 30 April
362nd Frankfurt/Rhein-Main (Y-73) - 8 April	

APPENDIX 5

Final air combat totals (all P-47s, except where noted)

Ninth Air Force

36th - 37
 48th - 19
 50th - 64
 354th - 15 with P-47 (637 total)
 358th - 113
 362nd - 121
 365th - 121.5
 366th - 103
 367th - 89
 368th - 129
 371st - 69
 373rd - 111
 404th - 47
 405th - 63
 406th - 84

Twelfth and Fifteenth Air Forces
(all fighter types)

27th - 67
 57th - 184
 79th - 118
 86th - 25
 332nd - at least five with P-47 (113 in total)
 324th - 67
 325th - 540
 350th - 53

APPENDIX 6

Tally of High Scorers

Ninth Air Force

50th FG

Frank E Adkins, 313th FS 2 (5)
 Robert D Johnston, 81st FS 6

358th FG

Donald O Scherer, 366th FS 5

362nd FG

Edwin O Fisher, 377th FS 7
 Morton D Magoffin, HQ flight 5
 Joseph Z Matte, 378th FS 5

365th FG

Robert L Coffey, HQ flight 6
 Robert M Fry, 388th FS 4
 Rockford V Gray, HQ flight 3 (6.5)
 James E Hill, 388th FS 5
 Donald E Hillman, HQ flight 4

366th FG

Melvyn Paisley, 390th FS 5

368th FG

Paul P Douglas, HQ flight & 396th FS 3 (7)
 William J Garry, 395th FS 4
 Randall W Hendricks, 397th FS 5

371st FG

Rudolph Augarten, 406th FS 2 (6)
 Rockford V Gray, HQ flight 3 (6.5)

373rd FG

Robert W Burns, 411th FS 4
 Edward B Edwards, 411th FS 5.5
 David L King, 412th FS 4 (5)

404th FG

John W Wainwright, 508th FS 6

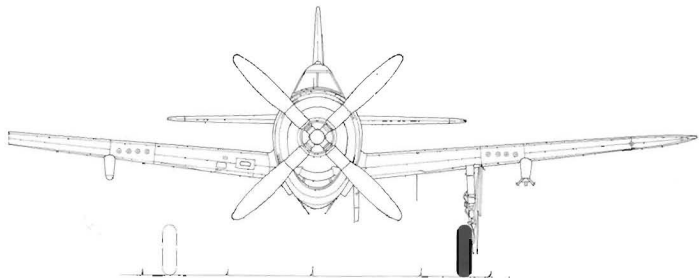
406th FG

William R Dunn, 513th FS 1 (6.5)

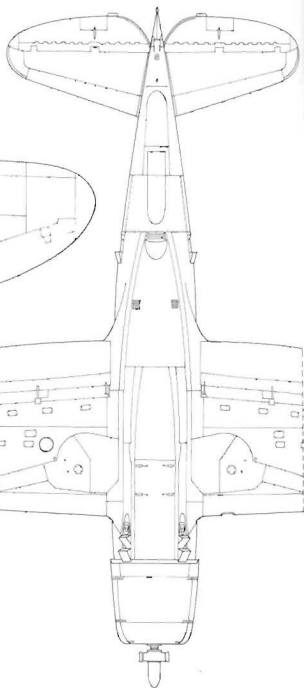
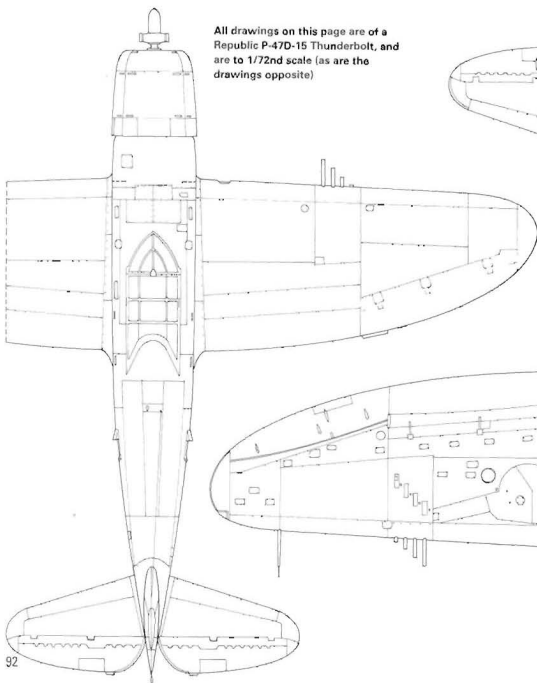
Fifteenth Air Force

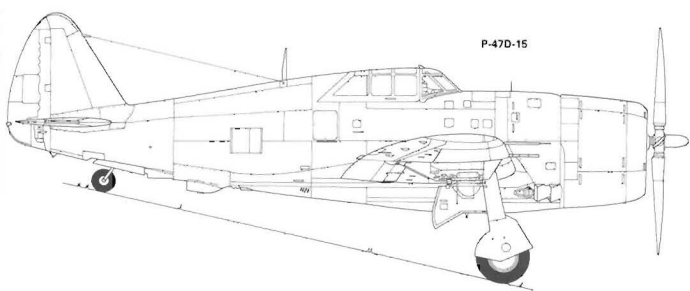
325th FG

Herschel H Green, 317th FS 10 (18)
 Eugene H Emmons, 317th FS 9
 George P Novotny, 317th FS 8
 Lewis B Chick, 317th FS 6
 Edsel Paulk, 317th FS 5
 William A Rynne, 317th FS 5



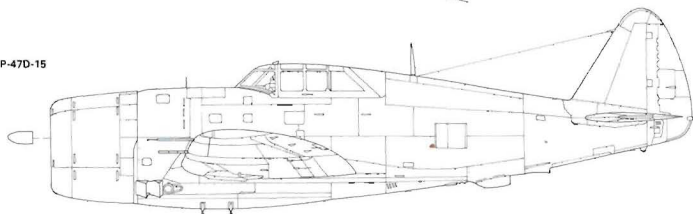
All drawings on this page are of a Republic P-47D-15 Thunderbolt, and are to 1/72nd scale (as are the drawings opposite)



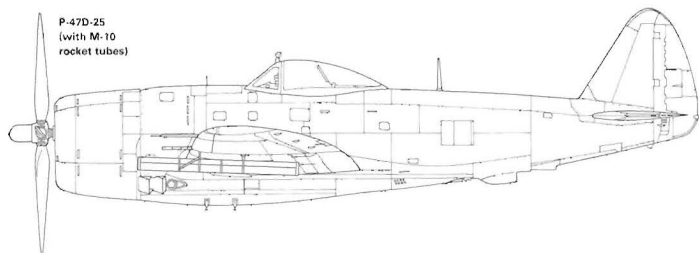


P-47D-15

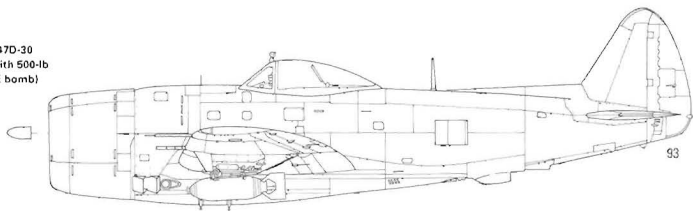
P-47D-15



P-47D-25
(with M-10
rocket tubes)



P-47D-30
(with 500-lb
HE bomb)



COLOUR PLATES

1

P-47D (sub-type and serial unknown) '11' of Capt Herschel H Green, 317th FS/325th FG, Celone, Italy, early 1944

An outstanding, and popular, fighter leader, 'Herky' Green was not only the ranking P-47 ace in the MTO, but also the AAF's top scoring pilot in theatre. One of only a handful of men to score kills on all three fighter types used by the 325th FG, namely the P-40, P-47 and P-51, Green commanded the 317th FS from March through to September 1944. Although this particular aircraft was his personal mount, he downed six aircraft on 30 January 1944 in a borrowed P-47 named *Star of Altoona*.

2

P-47D-16 42-75737/25 'HUN HUNTER' of 1Lt Eugene Emmons, 317th FS/325th FG, Lesina, Italy, May 1944

Gaining all nine of his victories in the P-47, Emmons was second only to ten-kill 'Herky' Green in the ace listings for the Thunderbolt. At least four of Emmons' successes were scored in this fighter, as was his final claim – an Fw 190 damaged on 13 June 1944. He also claimed kills in P-47s numbered '24' and '33', and possibly an earlier Thunderbolt as well. This heavy usage of aircraft was by no means uncommon in the MTO, what with the rigours of combat and austere Italian bases, blessed with less than ideal servicing facilities.

3

P-47D-16 42-76021/10 'Rocky' of Maj Lewis W Chick, CO of the 317th FS/325th FG, Celone, Italy, January 1944

Lewis 'Bill' Chick came to the 'Checkertails' having served in the ETO with both the 4th and 335th FGs. His P-47 experience was well utilised by the 325th, which turned in a fine record on escort duties with the Fifteenth Air Force. For a time it was the only P-47 unit flying such sorties, as the other ground attack units in the MTO remained in the Twelfth Air Force, to which the 325th had originally belonged. Bill Chick's success was also confined to the Thunderbolt, in which he scored a total of six victories – the last two (both Bf 109s) in this very aircraft.

4

P-47D-16 42-75971/27 'Ruthless Ruthie/Lady Janie VI' of 1Lt George P Novotny, 317th FS/325th FG, Lesina, Italy, April 1944

Another 'Checkertails' ace who got his 'eye in' while the 325th FG operated its first combat type, Novotny was credited with eight kills, three of these being on the P-40F/L with which the 325th was equipped prior to conversion onto the P-47 in late 1943. Having completed his tour, Novotny rotated home in June 1944 just prior to the 325th re-equipping with Mustangs.

5

P-47D-23 42-75008/88 'BIG STUD' of Lt Col Robert L Baseler, CO of the 325th FG, Lesina, Italy, April 1944

A larger than life character whose aircraft nickname caught on, Baseler officially scored six kills. He was one of the 325th's early aces, five of his tally being achieved while flying the P-40F over Sardinia between May–July 1943. A 'bubbletop' P-47 was later painted with similar markings to those shown after Baseler had left the group. He commanded the 'Checkertails'

from 5 July 1943 to 1 April 1944, and although he did not score any more victories, he also unofficially flew a number of missions in the new Mustang (which the group first flew on operations on 27 May 1944).

6

P-47D (sub-type and serial unknown) '33' Little Sir Echo' of 2Lt Edsel Paulk, 317th FS/325th FG, Lesina, Italy, May 1944

As Paulk's assigned P-47D, this fighter is believed to have been used by him to score all of his kills. Credited with three aircraft destroyed on the famous 30 January 1944 Villaorba raid, his tally was comprised of three Bf 109s and two Ju 52s.

7

P-47D-16 42-75971/27 'Ruthless Ruthie/Lady Janie VI' of 2Lt John M Simmons, 317th FS/325th FG, Lesina, Italy, April 1944

With a total of seven victories to his credit, Simmons flew this aircraft at the same time as ace Novotny, but he did not score any victories in this, or any other Thunderbolt – his success came later when the 325th had changed over to Mustangs. As the 'low numbered' squadron within the group, the 317th used aircraft coded between '10' and '39'.

8

P-47D-23 42-27682/4-M 'CAROL ANN II' of Col Morton Magoffin, CO of the 362nd FG, Rennes (A-27), France, August 1944

'Mort' Magoffin was one of the three aces who flew with the 362nd FG, and the pilot who gave his group the nickname 'Mogin's Maulers' – a contraction of his first and second names. Such names were in vogue during the war, but were by no means universally adopted. Flying a P-47D-11 and a 'bubbletop' D-25, as well as the D-23 depicted here, to obtain his victories, Magoffin was shot down by flak (in P-47D-25 42-26554) on 10 August 1944 and made a PoW.

9

P-47D-30 44-20473/FT-L' of Maj Glenn Eagleston, CO of the 353rd FS/354th FG, Rosieres-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944

Eagleston's personal P-47D has been well illustrated in the years since the war, partly because its cowling marking is so distinctive. That surely must have occurred to the dedicated P-51 pilots of the group, who needed something to lift their spirits during the P-47 period. Like many 353rd pilots, Eagleston merely changed the frame for his kills during his time on the Thunderbolt, as he did not add to his score until after P-51D Mustangs had been restored to the 354th FG in late February 1945.

10

P-47D-28 42-29336/FT-O' of Capt Kenneth H Dahlberg, 353rd FS/354th FG, Rosieres-en-Haye (A-98), France, February 1945

In contrast to some 354th FG pilots, Ken Dahlberg took to the P-47 well enough to score three kills (all in one day) in this very aeroplane while flying ground attack missions during the deadly winter of 1944–45. Just as P-47s were about to be replaced by P-51s, Dahlberg was shot down in 42-29336 and captured on 14 February 1945. His final score was 14.

11

P-47D-28 42-28473/'R3-F' Dorothy K of 1Lt Talmadge Ambrose, 410th FS/373rd FG, Lippstadt (Y-98), Germany, April 1945

Along with the other pilots of the 373rd FG, Ambrose may have resigned himself to the fact that air combat with the Luftwaffe was all but over for his tactical fighter group by the early spring of 1945. Then came 8 April. Embroiled in a dogfight with Fw 190Ds almost certainly from JG 26, the group shot down 11, and Ambrose almost made 'ace-in-a-day' with four kills. He also claimed an additional five aircraft as ground victories.

12

P-47D-30 44-20545/'B2-M' La Mort of 1Lt Melvyn R Paisley, 390th FS/366th FG, Handorf (Y-94), Germany, May 1945

In common with many other Ninth Air Force pilots, it took Mel Paisley many months to achieve the sought-after five kills to confirm him as an ace. Opportunity was all in air combat, and as such did not come the way of the fighter-bomber pilots as often as many of them would have liked. During his action-filled service, Paisley claims a very early use of an air-to-air missile when he shot an Fw 190 down with an M-10 rocket during Operation Bodenplatte on 1 January 1945.

13

P-47D-25 42-26407/'C4-Y' COFFEY'S POT of Lt Col Robert Coffey, 365th FG, Azeville (A-7), France, July 1944

A pilot who got his kills in a period when the Luftwaffe was better able to offer a substantial challenge to Allied ground attack operations, Coffey was credited with six victories in three different P-47s. Shot down by flak on 11 July 1944 in this aircraft, he evaded capture and return to England, and a staff job. His downed Thunderbolt was photographed by German troops, the snapshot surviving for 50 years.

14

P-47D-28 44-20272/'FT-Z' of 1Lt Lloyd Overfield, 353rd FS/354th FG, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944

One of the galaxy of 21 aces produced by one of the most successful fighter squadrons in history, Lloyd Overfield apparently adorned this aircraft with the name *Big Jake* on the port side – but as no photos of this artwork have yet come to light, we opted for this rather plain starboard view. It likely that the popular black skull and crossbones also appeared on the port side, as this became something of an unofficial 353rd FS badge, appearing on many of its P-47s.

15

P-47D-22 42-25693/'JJ-N' of 2Lt John W Weinwright, 508th FS/404th FG, Juvincourt (A-68), France, September 1944

A pilot who could be called the last ace of World War 2, John Weinwright's status was not confirmed until October 1998. There were no witnesses to his single-handed destruction of six Bf 109s on 28 September 1944, so the Ninth Air Force did not confer official ace status, despite the congratulations of the high command. The P-47 shown was not assigned to Weinwright, but was one that he used to damage two Fw 190s on 29 July 1944. The Thunderbolt apparently carried the name *Fireball* on its starboard side.

16

P-47D-27 42-27275/'17-B' "The King" of Lt Col Royal N Baker, 48th FG, St Trond (A-92), Belgium, spring 1945

An 'embryo' ace with three Spitfire kills with the 31st FG and half a Messerschmitt on P-47s, Royal 'King' Baker's real air combat success had to wait until the Korean War. As the Operations Officer for the 493rd FS, he flew a very plain P-47, although it could legitimately have had a cowling covered in small red and white checks – the 48th FG's approved marking. It may well have received such decoration at a later date, although many ended the war in the 'plain' finish seen here. Baker's final score was 16.5 kills, 13 of which were claimed flying F-86s in Korea.

17

P-47D-30 44-21071/'H5-W' JUST BESS of Lt Arnold L Abel, 392nd FS/367th FG, Eschborn (Y-74), Germany, May 1945

A pilot who 'lost' the P-47 assigned to him in a landing accident at Eschborn whilst being flown by another pilot (ironically, while practising a GCA approach), Abel finished the war with two victories. Following the writing off this aircraft in the accident, it was replaced by another similarly coded and named P-47, which featured an additional fuselage-length red flash.

18

P-47D-30 44-20514/'GQ-U' Wae Speck of Capt Lowell K Brueland, 355th FS/354th FG, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944

Another 355th FS ace, Brueland enjoyed all of his World War 2 air combat success on the P-51. Few would deny that during its Thunderbolt period, the squadron sported some of the most flamboyant aircraft markings schemes around. Presented with an extensive 'canvas', some pilots enthusiastically reproduced their P-51 kills, and favoured names, because few anticipated their Mustangs being returned. Adding two MiG kills over Korea, Brueland final score reached 14.5 victories.

19

P-47D-28 42-28750/'GQ-I' LIVE BAIT of Capt Clayton K Gross, 355th FS/354th FG, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944

Despite the very striking squadron colours and victories displayed on his aircraft, Clayton Gross's victorious combats all occurred on P-51s during the 354th's initial Mustang period. Astutely, Gross went on leave to the French Riviera for some of the time that the 'Pioneers' were 'sweating out' the P-47s foisted on them by higher authority. Returning to a P-51 cockpit, he was almost shot down – by P-47s! He completed two tours and was credited with six victories.

20

P-47D-30 44-33214/'CP-R' OLE TRAPPER IV of Lt Robert E Ward, 367th FS/358th FG, Toul, France, March 1945

Another pilot who claimed his victories in a hail of machine gun fire over an enemy airfield at 'zero feet', Ward flew this very neatly-marked P-47 in one of the most colourful of all Ninth Air Force units. With a sound pedigree of previous service with the 'Mighty Eighth', the 'Orange Tails' bred many fine pilots, but only one managed to get five in the air. All Ward's kills are believed to have been score against aircraft parked on the ground.

21

P-47D-30 44-33418/'CH-Y' *Stinky* of Lt Don Volkmer, 365th FS/358th FG, Sandhofen (Y-79), Germany, May 1945

A ground ace with the 365th FS, Volkmer joined the unit comparatively late, in November 1944. A group that applied colour markings to its P-47s fairly consistently, the 'Orange Tails' ended their tactical war at Sandhofen. The fate of this and many other P-47s was to be scrapped, although the best 'low time' examples soldiered on a little while longer with those groups chosen for occupation duty.

22

P-47D-30 44-33287/'B8-A' *FIVE BY FIVE* of Col Joseph Laughlin, CO of the 362nd FG, Furth (R-28), Germany, April 1945

A long-serving fighter leader who assumed command of the 362nd FG after 'Mort' Magoffin was made a PoW, Joe Laughlin had *FIVE BY FIVE* painted on seven 'razorback' and 'bubble-top' P-47s due his time with the group. The elephant was originally the work of squadron pilot, and commercial artist George Rarey, who was killed in action in June 1944. Joe Carpenter, another artist in the 379th FS, carried on the nose-art tradition for the pilots. The name was always accompanied by the cartoon elephant on Laughlin's P-47s, all of which carried the individual letter 'A'.

23

P-47D-30 44-33287/'B8-A' *FIVE BY FIVE* of Col Joseph Laughlin, CO of the 362nd FG, Straubing (R-68), Germany, May 1945

At the end of the war Joe Laughlin had the cowlings of his last P-47D decorated in the colour of each squadron within the group. His by then very familiar pink elephant and *FIVE BY FIVE* name were surrounded by the coloured checkerboard pattern seen here. This aircraft appears in wartime colour film footage of the Ninth Air Force, and was depicted in cartoon form in a painting displayed at Straubing. Laughlin ended the war with three ground victories, credit for sinking a German warship and the destruction of numerous tanks and trucks.

24

P-47D-30 44-33454/'IA-P' of 1Lt Donald O Scherer, 366th FS/358th FG, Sandhofen (Y-79), Germany, April 1945

The only confirmed aerial ace of the 'Orange Tails', Don Scherer flew at least one P-47D that is believed not to have carried his traditional nickname, *The Flying Dutchman*. With five kills to his credit, Scherer flew more than one P-47 during the course of his tour, although no details of the others are known.

25

P-47D-28 44-19698/'32', pilot unknown, GC II/5 'La Fayette' Armée de l'Air, Amberieu, France, circa autumn 1944

A representative aircraft of the six *Groupes de Chasse* formed on this type as part of a reconstituted French air force, this P-47D bears two kill markings below the cockpit rim, but the name of the pilot is unknown. Lacking much opportunity for air combat, few victories were scored by French P-47 pilots, and the kills that were usually displayed harked back to Battle of France in mid-1940.

26

P-47D-20 42-76464/'A8-O' *Peg O' My Heart* of Lt Floyd N Hass, 391st FS/366th FG, Asch (Y-29), Belgium, January 1945

Another case of a personalised P-47 being flown and crashed by another pilot, *Peg O' My Heart* was assigned to Hass but was being flown by a Lt Sampson when it belly-landed after being damaged by flak. The swastikas represented victories that Hass believed he had accumulated on 17-18 December 1944, although his five kills were reduced to just one confirmed following Ninth Air Force investigation of the claims.

27

P-47D-22 42-25742/'22-D' *Kansas Tornado II* of Capt Howard J Curran, 510th FS/405th FG, St Dizier (A-64), France, September 1944

Another pilot who believed that he had 'made ace', Curran lived up to the name painted on his P-47 by taking on the enemy with great enthusiasm. Unfortunately, the rigid rules governing victories downgraded his score to three. Curran was shot down on 12 September soon after claiming his third kill, but he evaded capture and made it back. Canopy framing in the squadron colour was a hallmark of this group.

28

P-47D-27 42-27309/'39' *OLE BALDY* of Lt John P Botten, 525th FS/86th FG, Brauschart, Germany, April 1945

One of the few P-47s belonging to the 'Candy Strippers' known to have carried kill markings, this aircraft was flown by a pilot who achieved all his victories on the ground. A unit not extensively covered photographically, the 86th was one of the Twelfth Air Force's stalwarts, which pounded the Axis on the southern front before moving into Germany as part of the 1st TACAF. Relocation of the serial number to the fuselage side when the tail was painted was a group hallmark.

29

P-47D-28 42-28641/'A7-W' *SLEEPY JEAN the 3rd*, pilot unknown, 395th FS/368th FG, St Dizier (A-64), France, circa May 1945

Typical of the bright late-war markings carried by many Ninth Air Force Thunderbolts, this machine bore four kill markings in the form of small German flags, but the pilot who claimed these (presumably) ground victories remains unknown. The aircraft was photographed in colour at St Dizier after an emergency landing with a badly twisted propeller blade.

30

P-47D-27 42-26919/'E4-E' *Shirley Jane III* of Capt Edwin O Fisher, 377th FS/362nd FG, Lignerolles (A-12), France, August 1944

Credited with a total of seven kills (all German fighters), Fisher was one of three aces in the 362nd FG. He scored his earlier kills in two 'razorback' P-47Ds, before getting the last two (both Bf 109s) in the aircraft depicted here on 9 August 1944. Despite being officially credited with four Fw 190s and three Bf 109s, the tally painted on his aircraft shows four Fw 190s, one Bf 109 and two Bf 110s – plus three V1s. Fisher also meticulously recorded his strafing sorties against road transport and trains, with shallow dive-bombing missions and fighter sweeps all listed separately.

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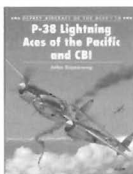
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Force. Thunderbolt aces within the Ninth Air Force, particularly, were rare, despite some 15 groups flying the fighter. Supporting troops on the ground, rather than searching out aerial foes, was the name of the game for the men of the Ninth. However, with the Luftwaffe often opposing such sorties through to April 1945, more than 20 pilots had the opportunity to score five or more kills and 'make ace'.

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